

# **Yoga in Hong Kong: Globalization, Localization, and the Fetishism of the Body**

**LIN, Kwan Ting Maggie**

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## Abstract

Originally a philosophical system from India, yoga has become a physical craze with strong social status connotations in Hong Kong. Everything in the yoga industry in Hong Kong is strongly related to social distinction, from the design of yoga studios to the ethnicity of teachers. Most yoga practitioners are engaged in physical yoga to attain a slim body, a middle class ideal, yet those with more education and money claim to go beyond the body and take on the spiritual path of yoga, which is considered more advanced according to yoga scriptures. A close analysis reveals that practicing spiritual yoga may be a distinction technique to appear more sophisticated; indeed, both the physical and spiritual yoga practitioners are engaged in a fetishism of the body.

Originally seen as the ultimate aim of yoga, spirituality alone does not have full validity in Hong Kong as yoga's aim. The slender body, with strong class connotations, assumes primary importance and serves as a prerequisite for spirituality to gain validity and prestige. With an expanding middle class, cultural/knowledge capital has assumed more direct association with one's status in recent years. Yoga is just one way, among many others, to display the distinction of the middle or upper-middle class, which is growing in sophistication.

Through 18 months of participant-observation in four yoga studios and various yoga events, this research includes detailed ethnographic account and draws from 33 in-depth interviews with yoga practitioners, yoga teachers, and yoga studio owners. Looking at the omnipresent distinction strategies in yoga in Hong Kong and drawing on Bourdieu, this thesis sheds light on Hong Kong's quickly evolving senses of social class.

瑜伽原來是一種印度哲學體系，但是在現今的香港社會裡，變成了運動狂熱，而且在香港更帶有強烈階級意義。瑜伽產業的不同層面都跟社會階級有莫大關連，從瑜伽館的設計裝修，到不同種族的老師。大部分參與瑜伽的人都練習身體瑜伽，希望從中得到一個苗條的身體，一個中產階級形象的象徵，但有比較富有和學歷較高的人聲稱自己已經超越了身體的層面並在追求瑜伽的哲學之道，根據瑜伽理論來說，這樣的層次是比較高的。通過仔細的分析，我們發現練習精神瑜伽可能只是一個顯得與人不同，讓自己看起來更高雅的手段；其實體位瑜伽和精神上瑜伽在某種程度上都是在進行身體崇拜。

本來被視為瑜伽中最終的目標的精神啓迪，現在獨立而言在香港社會上沒有被卻確認為瑜伽的目的。包含階級意義的纖瘦身體被認是最重要，也成為了進入瑜伽哲學層面而被承認為優越的先決條件。隨著中產階級在擴大，文化／知識資本與個人階級的關連在近年變得更加直接。瑜伽只是在日漸成熟的中產／上中產階級中表現身分和與人不同的方法之一。

經過十八個月在四家瑜伽館和不同的瑜伽活動的參與觀察，這篇論文包括了詳細的田野考察資料，及三十三個與瑜伽練習者，老師，瑜伽館主人的深入訪問。通過在香港瑜珈裡無所不在的表現身分不同的手段，對香港激烈出現及轉變的社會階級作出了深入的探討。





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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This research investigates how yoga has become a representation of social status in Hong Kong. Yoga originally was a way to attain spiritual enlightenment in ancient India, but in Hong Kong, it has become the latest fitness craze and the trendiest way to get a slender body. Having a slim body is a middle-class ideal, and therefore many people use yoga as a way to achieve this. However, a minority of people purport to go beyond the body into yoga spirituality, often considered a more advanced phase of yoga, which I argue is a perhaps more “advanced” means of obtaining distinction and social status. Irrespective of the technical divisions between different schools of yoga, yoga practitioners mainly categorize themselves into two major groups, physical and spiritual practitioners. Physical yoga practitioners are mainly concerned with the bodily effects of yoga, while spiritual yoga seekers supposedly go beyond the body to seek spiritual enlightenment. In this research, I look into the different aspects of yoga in Hong Kong to demonstrate how it is primarily concerned with social status and distinction. Through investigating the historical development of yoga, yoga studios, the images of yoga in the media and advertisements, the relationship between teachers and students, and the ethnicity of teachers, I have found how different parties put different emphases on the body and spirituality. In the end, I argue that whether it has a bodily or a spiritual focus, it is also about distinction and status representation. Yoga is not only about the pursuit of status and distinction; but such a pursuit is present and very real.

Initially yoga was for spiritual enlightenment, and physical yoga, which is considered one-eighth of the whole yoga system, was one way to pursue this. Body and spirituality are

just different parts of the yoga system, with physical yoga as one of the ways to help reach spirituality; and there is no contradiction between body and spirituality. “The yogi conquers the body by the practice of *asanas* and makes it a fit vehicle for the spirit” (Iyengar 1992 [1966]: 41). However, in Hong Kong, an apparent contradiction seems to exist between yoga as a spiritual quest and a physical pursuit for health and beauty, as yoga is overwhelmingly about slimming. Most of the people who practice are not aware of yoga philosophy but are merely trying to shape their bodies when they do yoga. Very often, images of yoga in Hong Kong are not only concerned with the body and slimming, but are also heavily sexualized, deviating from the spiritual roots of yoga. According to the principles stated by the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (1990 [1978]), the most revered yoga scripture, one should focus the attention inwards, instead of focusing primarily on the physical and see it as the goal, one should be more aware of the soul, connect with the universe and be one with nature. This is not the case in the Hong Kong pursuit of yoga, which exists in a contradiction between body and spirituality, and between body and soul.

To discuss this on a more abstract level, we can say that yoga has become fetishized. In this thesis, I borrow the definition of fetishism as an “extravagant irrational devotion to some object, idea, or practice”<sup>1</sup>. I extend this concept to combine with Freud (1997 [1927]) and Marx (1978) to present a situation where a part of an object is taken for the whole. Marx’s original idea of fetishism emphasizes the exchange value instead of use value of commodities (Marx [1867]1974: 77). Marx’s emphasis is applicable to yoga as material consumption, with the slim body being commodified and given high exchange value. Images of successful women in Hong Kong show them having a slender body, and slimming salons often boast of how their clients’ lives have taken a dramatic change for the better after they have lost a significant amount of weight. On the other hand, yoga’s use

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<sup>1</sup> According to the *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*.



value in enabling health seems to be played down or presented as merely an added value on top of its beauty effects. Yoga has become a commodity which people have to pay for: this is commodity fetishism. In addition to Marx, the Freudian idea of fetishism, which concerns sexual obsession of a part of the body or an object (Freud 1927), is also useful for my definition of fetish in this thesis. Fetish as described by Freud indicated a particular body part or object that one is fixated upon and sexually obsessed with. I borrow the Freudian interpretation about fixation and obsession of the body, despite leaving out a large part of the sexual connotations of Freud, which I then combine with the Marxian definition; thus I take fetishism to mean taking a part as the whole, and to consider it as more than the whole. For instance, instead of the person as a whole, the body of the person is seen as having the utmost importance, as perhaps more important than the character and personality. Meanwhile, in close alliance with the idea of commodity fetishism, I also regard fetishism as focusing on a thing's (in this case, the body's) exchange value and paying little attention to its use value.

Yoga in Hong Kong involves the fetishism of the body since most people seem to have forgotten that yoga is a spiritual practice; perfecting the body has become the prime concern. However, fetishism of the body may not be true of all practitioners. Some may not fetishize the body but focus on spiritual enlightenment, which may, indeed, be an alternative form of fetishism. Through engaging in the various practices required of spiritual yoga, these practitioners are actually exerting a heavy control over their bodies, although they most often like to appear as if they no longer cared about the supposed slimming effects of yoga on their bodies and behave as if they have transcended their bodies. However, the net effect of the control these spiritual practitioners have over their bodies is such that their bodies are kept even under stricter maintenance than that of the physical practitioners. Thus, going into spirituality may be a beautiful veil these



practitioners put on, allowing focus on the body while appearing to transcend it, and gaining social distinction in the process.

Yoga carries much distinction as an activity because it was originally only available to the rich in Hong Kong. It has only become popularized in recent years due to the opening of large studios. At the same time, a slim body is the middle-class ideal, which yoga is believed to be a good tool for obtaining. It has won out amongst other exercises such as dancing and going to the gym as the fitness fad that is said to have the most effective slimming effects in Hong Kong in recent years; thus yoga carries a double social status.

On a broader scale, yoga in Hong Kong demonstrates a novel trend in globalization, the movement from India to the West to Hong Kong, that is, from periphery to core to semi-periphery. In the process, much change has taken place in its content to facilitate its spread and led to its popularity in different parts of the world (De Michelis 2004; Strauss 2005). Yoga, available in many places throughout the world today, has come to emphasize the physical aspect and has deviated much from its original spiritual form. The globalization of yoga is not new, but in Hong Kong in particular, it has manifested itself as a way to obtain slimness and beauty that contradicts its spiritual Indian tradition. Images of yoga are heavily sexualized in Hong Kong, encouraging people to focus on external bodily beauty. This goes against the principles stated in the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (1990[1978]), as we saw earlier.

Looking at the slim bodily ideal and how it is manifested in yoga, this thesis seeks to understand how yoga is at the center of the slim bodily ideal propagation in Hong Kong. On top of aesthetic concerns that bring the focus to the body, I argue that it is status representation that draws people to do yoga. Exploring how people focus on the body in yoga can shed light on the importance of the body in our society. Comparing it with how spirituality is valued, we can better understand the significance of the two and tease out



their intertwined relationship in Hong Kong society.

### *Contribution of this Thesis*

This thesis is the first research devoted to studying yoga in Hong Kong. This is of particular significance because yoga, more than a fitness fad, is used as a representation of social status and distinction to reflect the class situation in Hong Kong, a rapidly changing phenomenon. Also, this thesis provides an East Asian perspective on the significance of yoga, how this supposedly ancient Indian practice is being represented and received, after going through Western hands and coming back to the East. This can correspond and perhaps resonate with the yoga research done elsewhere. By looking at what is being played up in yoga, the body or spirituality, and the interpretation of yoga by people with different class values, my research extends the scope of the development of yoga under globalization.

Unlike much of the earlier yoga research, which has a focus on the functions and technicalities of yoga, this thesis places yoga in Hong Kong's socio-cultural context, aligning it with the more recent trend of yoga studies. More specifically, this thesis uses yoga as a tool to study social status representation, which has not received major attention before in the concept of yoga.

Before going into the analysis of the yoga scene in Hong Kong, it is important to note the different interpretations of yoga and narrow down my scope before proceeding. The following section is devoted to my definition of yoga in this thesis, borrowing from various interpretations.

### *Defining Yoga*

Taking the historical perspective, yoga comes from India, with a close association with

the Hindu tradition. It is one of the six principles of Indian thinking known as *darsana*, meaning “that which tells us everything we would like to know” (Desikachar 1980: 1). It has a further meaning: “a mirror in which we see ourselves.” The word yoga has its root from Sanskrit, meaning to integrate, to unite, to yoke, and to control. It means “to bring two things together, to meet, to unite” or “to converge the movement of the mind” (ibid.: 1-2). But it can also mean “to reach a point we have not reached before.” Yoga can also mean “to act in a particular way with all of our attention focused upon that action” (Desikachar 1980: 2-3). It is

the method or technique, the programme of psycho-physical, moral and spiritual training, by following which one can fulfill the ultimate destiny of life....[It] implies both the goal of life and the path leading to that goal. A yogi is one who follows the spiritual path of self-discipline, or who has attained the goal of self-realization (Chaudhuri 1965: 21).

It is also “the means to attain a new desired position” (Desikachar 1980: 2). For example, if we want to be happy and we manage to find happiness, that is yoga. Dasgupta, author of five volumes of *History of Yoga Philosophy*, also stated that a basic premise of yoga is that people are all different, each with their own psychological and physical characters. Therefore every individual should be allowed to grow in his own path following his own nature. On a more structural level, yoga can be regarded as a systematic philosophy with two related parts. First, there is the theoretical part, which formulates philosophy and reasoning. Secondly, there is the practical part, bearing a code of practices, including physical yoga (Dasgupta 1930: 8). This is well summarized by Strauss as “both a way of being in the world and a system of practices” (Strauss 2005: 14); and on a more practical level, it is “a modern form of alternative medicine and physical fitness training” (Alter 2004: 3), as illustrated by anthropologist Joseph Alter when discussing the recent history of yoga in India, looking into how the development of yoga in the country reflects and coincides with India’s social changes. It is this broad and straightforward definition that



will be adapted in this thesis.

For this thesis, I will start with introducing two staggeringly different interpretations of yoga: yoga according to the spiritual traditions, and yoga in Hong Kong. The staggering difference between the two forms is a core part of this thesis and supports why the yoga phenomenon in Hong Kong is worth investigating.

## Yoga Philosophy

The most authoritative classical yoga scripture, the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (Satchidananda 1990 [1978]), sets forth *ashtanga* yoga<sup>2</sup> (125)—the eight limbs<sup>3</sup> of yoga—with *samadhi*, or spiritual enlightenment, as the ultimate aim of yoga. The limbs, in ascending order, are: observance, non-violence, physical yoga, breathing techniques, withdrawal from the external senses, concentration, meditation, and finally *samadhi*, the highest limb. Yoga aims at training the mind in order to integrate with the universe and to set the mind free from the cage of matter. The *Yoga Sutras* are believed to have been written around 2000 years ago, in Sanskrit, and consist of 195 aphorisms. They are a required reading in many yoga teachers' training courses around the world.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, seen by many as another essential yoga text, is actually a “religious classic rather than a philosophical treatise” (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957: 101). Much of the text is devoted to discussing the idea of the Supreme, which is “at once the transcendental, the cosmic, and the individual reality. In its transcendental aspect the Supreme is the pure Self unaffected by any action or experience, detached, and unconcerned” (ibid.: 101), according to *A Source Book of Indian Philosophy*. The *Gita* says nothing about physical yoga, but does define four types of yoga, Raja Yoga or Psycho-Physical Meditation, Bhakti Yoga or Devotion, Karma Yoga or Selfless Action, and

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<sup>2</sup> *Ashtanga* yoga is widely accepted as the basis of yoga philosophy in Hong Kong and elsewhere. There are also other paths which practitioners adhere to, but this is the most common and popular in Hong Kong.

<sup>3</sup> The eight limbs of yoga is essentially the eight parts comprising of yoga.

Jnana Yoga or Self Transcending Knowledge (DiPecoraro 2006). It proposes that growing beyond identification with the temporal ego, the "false self," and identifying with the truth of the immortal self is what leads to true enlightenment. Detachment from the material sense of ego is at the core as it allows the yogi to enter the realm of the Supreme. This philosophy is largely similar to yoga philosophy. Although no physical aspect of yoga is mentioned, the *Gita* is still popular and is frequently discussed among spiritual yoga practitioners.

However, the number of spiritual yoga practitioners is few. In our contemporary world, much of what is mentioned in the *Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras* is not adhered to. The means of yoga—the body—has become an end in itself for many yoga practitioners today. But spirituality is nonetheless important, for at least some practitioners. Before going into the discussion of how yoga spirituality is manifested, let us first look into what yoga spirituality is about.

### *Yoga Spirituality*

Yoga traditionally came from a spiritual tradition, and can be interpreted religiously, as "to be one with the Lord" (Desikachar 1980: 2). There are multiple definitions, and on a personal level, it is believed that anything that allows people to understand something higher than themselves is yoga. Also, yogic belief holds that religion is a kind of yoga to help men attain union with God or integrate with existence but not a religion in itself. It is seen as a universal religion that tries to help individuals attain self-fulfillment; it emphasizes the oneness of human spirituality and advocates that people of all faiths could practice yoga. Hence it is also regarded as a universal spirituality beyond all religions (Chaudhuri 1965: 22-23).

Despite the physical exercise that we associate with yoga today, yoga classics often



stress that “physical postures and breathing exercises do not belong to the essence of yoga” (Chaudhuri 1965: 21). Instead, such exercises are used to prepare for some higher stage of yogi practice such as concentration and meditation. During my fieldwork, I have been told by various yoga practitioners that “the real purpose of yoga” is not for slimming but for training the body and strengthening the spine, so that the person could stay longer in meditation.

Mircea Eliade, a learned scholar of Indian philosophy and yoga, also stressed the differentiation of yoga from exercise. “Hatha Yoga cannot and must not be confused with gymnastics” (Eliade 1990 [1958]: 228). Yoga practice can start at any limb, for example, with the studying of the philosophy of the *Yoga Sutras*, or breathing exercises, but not necessarily bodily yoga (Desikachar 1980: 3). This points to an interesting discrepancy between classical yoga and what we perceive as yoga today.

### **Yoga in Hong Kong**

Yoga in Hong Kong differs in fundamental ways from the above analysis. In India, yoga was originally a set of philosophically-based practices for Hindu men to strengthen their bodies so as to facilitate spiritual enlightenment, as the Hindu religion was traditionally reserved for men. Elizabeth De Michelis points out that nowadays when people refer to yoga, they mean physical yoga, which she terms Modern Postural Yoga (MPY) (De Michelis 2004). It has a primary concern on the body, and has little or no spiritual elements. Yoga in Hong Kong is particularly tilted towards the physical, with marketing and advertising overwhelmingly focusing on its slimming benefits. Most often, they have no reference to spirituality at all. Slimming and exercising are most often named as the reason for doing yoga. In addition, the question I encountered most frequently from non-practitioners about my research is whether yoga is effective. It turns out that they



always mean whether yoga has helped me to slim up. This demonstrates well the degree of body fetishism in yoga in Hong Kong.

“Pure Yoga”, the biggest yoga chain, estimated the number of regular practitioners of yoga in Hong Kong in mid-2007 to be 120,000 (*Khaleej Times* 2007). Yoga appeals to Hong Kongers because it markets itself as offering relaxation and exercise, which fits perfectly with the stressful and sedentary lifestyle of Hong Kong people. But more importantly, it is marketed as a slimming exercise. Power yoga<sup>4</sup> is very popular because it is a strenuous workout and hot yoga<sup>5</sup> is trendy due to the resultant weight loss. According to Gluckman (2006b), about 90 percent of the students in Hong Kong are women and most of them say they do yoga to lose weight; thus it is not surprising to see billboards of yoga studios in Hong Kong boasting about “the benefits of yoga: weight loss, smoother skin, better sex” (Gluckman 2006b). I found the same when I conducted the 18-month participant observation for this thesis. One studio even has a form for the prospective customer to tick, among sixteen boxes, what they would like to achieve through yoga; the three supposed functions of yoga listed above are among the sixteen choices.

All this is encouraged by the big luxurious studios around the city. These studios are “part five-star spa, part exclusive country club” (Gluckman 2006a), equipped with top-rate hotel-quality facilities such as showers and towels. At the same time, world-renowned teachers are also employed to teach the numerous styles of yoga offered, unlike the one style offered per studio as is sometimes the case in the West. New styles of yoga have also been invented to cater to the curiosity of the local audience. Often, these studios are lined

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<sup>4</sup> Power yoga is a Western phenomenon. It has no clear definition but is a vigorous and fitness-based approach to yoga. Thus one power yoga class could differ significantly from the next. It was invented in an effort to make yoga more approachable to the U.S. and contributed much to bringing yoga to the gyms there, which led to the huge popularization of yoga in the mid-1990s. It usually resembles *ashtanga* yoga, a classic style of yoga, which consists of series of yoga postures connected in a continuous manner.

<sup>5</sup> Hot yoga is basically, as its name suggests, yoga class conducted in a heated room. The room could be heated up to 42 degrees. Most hot yoga is said to have come from “Bikram Yoga”, a patented hot yoga sequence with strict controlled conditions including a room temperature of 40.5 degrees.



with mirrors, encouraging people to look at their bodies. This shows how body fetishism is driven and propagated by commercialism.

Compared to elsewhere in the developed world, the scale of yoga in Hong Kong is unprecedented. Media coverage by foreign journalists highlights the wealth involved and the lavishness of Hong Kong's yoga phenomenon, emphasizing the posh studios and unbeatable views from the studios (Ferretti 2008: 84). Yoga is said to have taken a lavish twist (Gluckman 2006a). Some of my informants, who are Western teachers with extensive experience teaching in Europe and North America, marvel at the scale and intensity of yoga in Hong Kong, at how quickly it boomed and at the degree of extravagance, which they say is unseen elsewhere. The large number of international teachers, long opening hours, and the wide availability of classes are also characteristic of Hong Kong. A recently opened five-star hotel, The Landmark Mandarin Oriental, includes the city's first resident yoga master. Another five-star hotel that opened in 2005 has a high-tech oxygenated yoga room (Gluckman 2006 a & b). Now, major studios usually have local and Indian teachers. According to unofficial statistics, there are 60 to 70 yoga studios in Hong Kong (Chiu 2007).

### *A Typical Yoga Class*

Yoga classes in Hong Kong usually last for one hour unless otherwise specified. The teacher often sits at the mat in front of the class, and some of them would start with leading the class to chant "om" together, with the class sitting in a cross-legged or lotus position. And then the teacher will lead 50 minutes of yoga postures, by demonstrating the posture him/herself, or simply by saying the name of the posture instructing the students and giving verbal cues as the teacher goes around the class correcting them. Depending on the teacher, the degree of vigor of the postures, the level of difficulty, and how the postures are

linked—whether in a sequence or as independent postures—and how many postures are done vary. Yoga lessons are almost always concluded with a few minutes of *sivasana*<sup>6</sup>, corpse pose, with participants lying flat on the mat with arms and legs spread out, and eyes closed. The lights are often switched off or dampened. This “formula” is standard across the studios I have been to in Hong Kong. It also agrees with the data from my personal experience engaging in yoga classes in the Netherlands, New York City and Beijing, which is the same as what I have been told of classes in Australia and England. Therefore instead of the format of a class, it is the school of yoga, as well as the style of teaching, ambience, and spirituality the teacher instills into the class which distinguishes it.

Before going any further into the particular interpretation of yoga in Hong Kong we see today, let us go back to explore the history of yoga and how it developed before coming to Hong Kong.

### *Brief History of Yoga*

Yoga, according to various interpretations, is said to have originated three to five thousand years ago. However, yoga teachings were loose and did not have a system until Patanjali compiled the *Yoga Sutras*, which is believed to have been finished between 100 B.C. and 500 B.C. (Flood 1996) to perhaps “around 2000 years ago” (Satchidananda 1990 [1978]). Although not the inventor of yoga, Patanjali is still the most prominent figure in the history of yoga.

Yoga was originally a spiritual practice limited to a small group of people in India. However, there has been a conscious effort by the Indian government in recent years to sell yoga to the Western world. According to Strauss (2005), yoga is a major “cultural export”

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<sup>6</sup> Sivansana is a posture where one is supposedly completely relaxed, with the body lying flat on the ground, arms and legs spreading out, palms facing upward. The posture is like that of a dead body thus it is termed “corpse pose”.



of India. It is seen as “a way to reconnect with the spiritual world, reduce stress, and regain health and freedom-- all without having to lose the productive capitalist base upon which Americans and Europeans had staked their futures” (Strauss 2005: 6).

The Westernization of yoga began in 1893 when Swami Vivekananda presented yoga as the cure for the modern Western world at the Parliament of the World’s Religions at the Chicago World’s Fair. In emphasizing universal brotherhood, this was well received by the middle and upper classes in Europe and America because it addressed the problems faced by industrial societies. Since then, yoga has taken on new meanings and comes to signify anything from “the Wonder That Was India”, highlighting the Indian image of yoga and how much it can help the world as a way to universal salvation (Strauss 2002: 232 and 239). According to *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Eliade 1990 [1958]: xix), yoga is a solution for the anxiety and despair of modern Western societies. It provides a way for people to remain in the world without becoming exhausted. Strauss echoes this view and stresses “yoga as a tool for the development of modern India” as well as a bringer of salvation to the world (Strauss 2002: 231). Looking at all these, we can see that the Indian government has been quite successful in promoting yoga to the world, although the yoga practiced throughout much of the world is often not much like the yoga promoted by the Indian government. Indeed, traditional yoga as practiced in India was quite different from what most people practice in the rest of the world today.

Following India’s independence in 1947, the Indian government supported yoga as a means of asserting the position of India in the international arena and yoga’s position in India itself (Strauss 2002: 235). At the same time, yoga was advanced as being scientific in order to accommodate the Western audience. Swami Kuvalayanada, another influential yoga master, gained scientific validation for yoga as a health-promoting program and advanced yoga as “an ancient Indian solution to a contemporary problem by Western

contact” (Strauss 2002: 242). He initiated a synthesis of faith and reason in yoga and presented India “as the seat of world spiritual wealth, in opposition to the material wealth concentrated in the West” (Strauss 2002: 242).

### *Modern Yoga*

Modern Postural Yoga has been popularized by B. K. S. Iyengar since the 1950s. He can be regarded as the most influential figure in shaping modern yoga by emphasizing the central importance of *asanas* (postures). He refocused yoga from its spiritually-rich form into the secular form we see today, and addressed the needs of modern society. His most famous book, *Light on Yoga* (Iyengar 1992 [1966]), is in the form of a do-it-yourself manual to teach readers to learn and practice by themselves; it was illustrated with photos of Iyengar himself in various yoga postures. *Light on Yoga* was also the first book to encourage aesthetic appreciation of *asanas* in and of themselves. The book discusses the effects of yoga from a Western medical and fitness training point of view, emphasizing its medical, and fitness applications, for example, to combat stress, recover quickly from illness, and relieve depression. Specific fitness needs, for example, “to reduce body weight” (Iyengar 1992 [1966]: 85) and “to reduce the size of the abdomen” (Iyengar 1992 [1966]: 85) was also discussed. Iyengar also added two distinct features to modern yoga which varied from the traditional: voluntary good works and “self improvement”. Thus yoga became seen as “a comprehensive tool for self-improvement and healing, potentially suitable for self-administration in total autonomy from institutional and societal control, purely on the basis of individual choice, taste or need” (De Michelis 2004: 211). By 1990, it was estimated that several million people worldwide are practicing under Iyengar’s method; he has contributed greatly to the popularization of yoga in the West (ibid.: 205).

De Michelis (2004), as I have discussed before, provides much background on the



development of yoga in the West, focusing on Great Britain. She remarks on the fact that yoga is matched with secular, pragmatic and rationalistic features of the West and its successful marketing in relation with “health and fitness” and as “alternative medicine” has led to its popularity in the West (2004: 15). Its flexible interpretation also allows it to become a contemporary healing ritual, as it is “suited for our largely secularized and developed multicultural, multifaith societies” (ibid. 16). This is also related to the idea of stress as a psychosomatic syndrome, which came about in the 1980s. As modern lifestyles led to sedentariness and frustration, yoga is targeted as a means to improve fitness and de-stress oneself; De Michelis believed that is why modern postural yoga became seen as a solution for stressful urban living (De Michelis 2004). Although depending on where one is in the world, yoga carries different meanings, most places have physical yoga at the center of their practice. This emphasis on the physical has apparently led to yoga’s popularity in the last few decades.

### **Yoga’s Popularization Model**

De Michelis (2004) states that yoga first become popular in Great Britain in the second half of the 20th century, following three stages of development. From the 1950s to the mid-1970s was the popularization stage, where many schools and teachers, both Indian and non-Indian appeared on the scene. There was considerable media attention, e.g. popular books and television programs to circulate information on the subject. Yoga classes also gained popularity, both on a private basis and in adult education groups. It is estimated that there were 30,000 yoga practitioners in the U.K. by the mid-1970s.

The second stage, consolidation, lasted from the mid-1970s until the late 1980s. Many schools and teachers fell by the way but the popularization of yoga had been achieved. More permanent institutional structures were established and some schools expanded. The

more Indian-inspired schools with stronger religio-philosophical inclinations reinforced the New Age movement. Modern Yoga was treated as an alternative medical system; the possible practical application of yoga was also explored.

From the late 1980s onwards was what De Michelis calls the acculturation stage. In that stage, prominent British institutions granted recognition to yoga schools and recommended them for the public. Physical yoga became accepted by many as a complementary medicine. Doctors also recommended it to patients. Yoga teaching became more professional, and techniques became specialized, standardized and/or institutionalized. At the grassroots level, there was little “spiritual pupilage” but more client-professional relationships. De Michelis estimated that there were 120,000 people attending yoga classes in Britain but that figure does not include those who practiced on their own, which would greatly increase the total (2004: 191-194). This is the situation in Britain but De Michelis (2004) asserts that the situation is similar in most English-speaking countries. Since England had a direct colonial link to India, yoga may have been more easily popularized there than elsewhere. As we will see, the situation in Great Britain to an extent resembles that of Hong Kong.

One significant similarity between Britain and Hong Kong in terms of the yoga population is that there is more of a client-professional relationship in the middle class but little spiritual exchange, whereas there is more “spiritual pupilage” moving up the social ladder in the upper-middle class. This is one of the points I illustrate and elaborate on in this thesis, that yoga spirituality is limited to those from an upper-middle-class background, and such behavior could be seen as a desire to appear to come from a good class. There tends to be a marked gap between the middle class and upper-middle class in how yoga is conceived.

Before going into the discussion of how social distinction is brought about by yoga,



and the different attitudes towards yoga, I will introduce a variety of literature to provide a solid background and reference points for this thesis.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A variety of literature, on yoga, body, and social class is drawn on in this thesis. I have divided this literature review into three sections. First, I will look into previous research on yoga. Next, I will examine general theories of the body, and also sport, and social distinction. In the third part, I will look at ethnographies, although not necessarily on yoga, which are of interest to this study.

### *Previous Studies of Yoga*

Although extensive research has been done on yoga philosophy, especially the more classic texts, only a few have been based on ethnographic fieldwork, especially outside of India. This literature often appeared since the late 1990s. Those which are based on ethnographic fieldwork have been done in India or in major cities in the West. Strauss's book on the globalization of yoga is one example (Strauss 2005). She wrote about her ethnographic experience in India, Germany and the U.S.. She looked into how yoga has circulated world-wide and re-oriented: from India to the West, which in turn has influenced yoga's development in India. Her observation is that yoga has differed much from its ancient Indian roots. Its "contemporary definition and practice reflects more about modern transnational cultural flows than pristine ancient traditions" (2005: 8), and yoga has become "a transnational cultural product" (ibid.: 9).

Earlier, Lau (1998) analyzed the commodification of various bodily practices, including yoga, tai-chi, aromatherapy, and macrobiotic eating in the U.S.. She concluded that very often traditionalized bodily practices, especially those from the East, are often rendered products for the body (Lau and Kuan 1998: vii). Although such practices

emphasize body-mind holism, the fact is that they are seen as being from the cultural “other” resulting in them being taken purely as bodily products.

De Michelis (2004) has shown in detail the development of modern yoga in recent decades. In her book, she gives a close description of how it has spread from India to the West, with the main focus being put in Europe and England. She devotes her book’s last chapter to investigating how individual yoga classes are conducted, applying the three phases of rites of passage suggested by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner: separation, transition and incorporation. Through this, she sees that the contemporary yoga class has become a “healing ritual of secular religion” (De Michelis 2004: 248), as it fulfills the needs of physical fitness and psychosomatic relaxation, making it highly suitable for developed societies (ibid.: 260).

Singleton (2005) goes further into explaining yoga’s popularity in heavily populated cities in the West, where life is relentlessly hectic (Singleton 2005: 301). He discusses how yoga has been rendered a relaxation technique to suit the needs of urban dwellers. He argues that yoga is largely seen as a relaxation technique because it has been marketed that way, but relaxation is not inherently the nature of yoga. “Relaxationism, as it manifests in Modern Yoga, is far less (as some would have us believe) an integral package dispatched through the millennia by Indian sages than a symptom of the religious and economic crisis of our time” (ibid.: 302). Yoga offers much to the postmodern city dweller, thus explaining the booming popularity of yoga in these crowded cosmopolitan cities. Singleton also discussed yoga’s “capacity to incorporate a highly eclectic array of therapies and New Age credos molded to the individual” (ibid.: 302), granting it high commodity value.

Alter (2004), on the other hand, focuses more purely on the development of yoga in modern India to reflect on Indian society. Using an historical anthropological perspective, Alter goes over texts on yoga to provide a detailed analysis of the development of yoga in



India in modern times. With the intention to study yoga as a modern phenomenon, he takes yoga “to be the product of human intelligence, not a condition of enlightened being” (Alter 2004: 213). Thus the idea of transcending the self and achieving immortality and freedom is “a cultural idea located in the time of human experience and in the special matrix of the material world” (ibid.: 213).

Hasselle-Newcombe (2005) provided an analysis that matches the orientation of this thesis. Through investigating Iyengar<sup>7</sup> yoga practitioners in England, focusing on their spiritual and religious belief, she found that “yoga practitioners tend to be well educated and financially stable enough to have the time and mental energy necessary to consider religiosity in a comparative manner” (Hasselle-Newcombe 2005: 320).

On the other hand, she found that discussions about the nature of religion in contemporary society often center on the term ‘spirituality’, and that those who are better educated and with more money show a stronger tendency to go into spirituality, although the concept of spirituality is extremely hard to define (ibid.: 320). This is similar to the assertion of this thesis but this thesis goes further in mapping out how yoga, and especially yoga spirituality, is used by a small group of people to gain social distinction. Different aspects of yoga bring distinction, as I will illustrate in the coming chapters. The focus on the spiritual practitioners is in chapter 6.

In recent years, much research on yoga has gone beyond the practice itself and into other facets of life, involving a wide range of topics such as intellectual property, tourism and Orientalism. Persson’s (2007) study on space in the Satynanda yoga community in Australia looked into the spatial configuration and consciousness of this group. However, it

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<sup>7</sup> Iyengar yoga, as earlier discussed, is a style of modern yoga which has a strong emphasis on the precision of the various body parts in the pose and often makes use of props such as straps, bricks and blankets to make detailed adjustments to reach the desired position. It is highly popular today in different parts of the world. “Iyengar yoga was one of the first types of asana-centered yoga to have been propagated in Britain” (Hasselle-Newcombe 2005: 306).



has little relevance to the situation in Hong Kong, since the nature of the yoga studied is extremely different from that which is popular in Hong Kong. Satynanda yoga is a very static form of yoga, and has no emphasis or supposed function in slimming, unlike the highly popular physical yoga in Hong Kong, which is extremely physically demanding. On top of that, the strong bonding, like a closely-knit social group in that yoga community in Australia also has little similarity with the situation in Hong Kong, where customers simply join a club and go there for classes. Fish (2007), through looking at how the Indian government and various other parties try to protect the intellectual property of yoga, a traditional knowledge, explores how Indian yoga has become a global commercial industry and how it provides a space for the innovative application and extension of IP management tools by different parties. She found that because yoga is such a controversial entity, it allows different actors to develop tools to change this information-knowledge into a manageable object. Her analysis discusses yoga as a global commodity with much value, which is also very true in Hong Kong. In her investigation, she found that many yoga or spiritual seekers do it as a New Age self-improvement trend, which satisfies the desire for narcissism of the young and middle class.

Neta Bar (2007) also introduced a class element into her research. She studied Americans and Israelis who go on yoga retreats in Guatemala and in their home country. It is worth noting that how the cosmopolitan middle class indulge and pamper themselves, in what Bar considers narcissism, seems to be a global phenomenon, with this group expanding everywhere, and one that can definitely be mapped out in Hong Kong. At the same time, Amy Moskowitz (2007) studied young travelers who go to India to engage in spiritual activities and looks at how they reconcile and straddle the party culture and religious culture. Religious practices often advocate abstinence from sex and drugs but the young travelers rarely adhere to those rules. Instead, they claim that it is spiritual reasons



that drive them to engage in such behavior. Moskowitz argues that this is a new form of Orientalism. Both studies by Bar and Moskowitz take into account the class element and the struggle between adhering to spiritual enlightenment through practicing yoga and posing restraints on the body, and physical desires, engaging in sex and drugs. This conflict is similar in nature to that between body and spirituality, which I investigate in this research. The analysis of the “transnationally-mobile and cosmopolitan middle class” (Bar 2007) provides exciting insights by focusing on their love of themselves and the reconciliation between asceticism and hedonism by these “spiritual seekers”. This cosmopolitan upper-middle class with transnational mobility is also present in Hong Kong and is a significant focus of this research.

After reviewing previous works done on yoga, let me now turn attention to studies being done on the body to better understand how the body involved in yoga is an important aspect of this thesis.

### **Theories of the Body, Class and Social Status**

Although we have looked at literature on yoga from an anthropological perspective, we also need to consider literature from a broader framework, on the anthropology of the body. Although yoga is not a sport, it is a pastime involving the body. Many people treat yoga as an exercise, and much research has included yoga as a sport when looking at its participation pattern. Therefore, literature from sport and leisure are also drawn on to shed light on yoga.

#### *Anthropology of the Body*

Frank (1991) explains the intertwined effect between body image and society: because consumer culture constantly bombards people with the ideal body, it results in “the endless producing and reproducing of desire, of the body in the world’s image and the world in the



body's image" (Frank 1991: 63). This shows that society reproduces itself on the body of people, which is exactly what Bourdieu's habitus of the body (Bourdieu 1990a: 63) is referring to—because society's norms are imposed and reflected upon individual bodies, and at the same time people's desires also shape society's ideal. Bourdieu argues that culture is incorporated onto the body within structural social contexts, and social practice is the outcome of a dialectical relationship between agency and structure. Thus the body becomes the site of social memory; as society is "written into the body, into the biological individual" (Bourdieu 1990a: 63). Habitus works on the unconscious level, as people's manners, deportment and demeanor tell personal history, which can reinforce social class, gender and even nation. Bourdieu writes of the body as reflecting culture, but Foucault goes further in discussing how the body is subjected and controlled at all times. He considers the body as being docile and essentially without agency. "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (Foucault 1984: 180); "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile bodies'" (ibid.: 182). The body is constantly disciplined and controlled by institutions and individuals, in what he termed the micro-politics on the body. His view provides a more in-depth analysis into the power and political value of the body, when compared to Bourdieu's idea that people's bodies reflect and reproduce culture and social structures. Instead of discussing power, Baudrillard, in turn, studies the value and meaning of the body and beauty in today's society:

The ethics of beauty... may be defined as the reduction of all concrete values—the 'use-values' of the body (energetic, gestural, sexual)—to a single functional 'exchange-value', which itself along in its abstraction, encapsulates the idea of the glorious, fulfilled body, the idea of desire and pleasure [jouissance], and of course thereby also denies and forgets them in their reality and in the end simply peters out into an exchange of signs. For beauty is nothing more than sign material being exchanged. It functions as sign-value. (Baudrillard 1998: 132)

This is a fine illustration of the non-material significance of the beauty of the body, but yet all is just a symbolic exchange value. This idea can be seen as an extension of Marx's



idea of commodity fetishism. More of Bourdieu's, Foucault's and Baudrillard's ideas on the body will be referred to in chapter 5 when discussing the fetishism of the body.

Aside from theories concerning the body, drawing on ethnographies concerning the body can also bring in a broad arena of ideas that are useful for this research, as I now discuss.

### *Ethnographies on the Body*

A variety of ethnographies have been chosen, all of which concern the importance of the body in the beauty and fitness industry. In consumer culture, the body is widely accepted as a medium for pleasure. In *Beauty Up*, in analyzing Japanese beauty salons, Miller (2006) concluded that, under capitalism, as everything can be transformed into a commodity or product with value, the body has become a project that requires constant attention and work. At the beauty salons<sup>8</sup>, bodily flaws of customers are repeatedly being treated in order to gain money.

Apart from works on the body in the beauty industry, there are also many works concerning the body in sport. In *Training the Body for China* (1995), Brownell draws on her own experience to look at how athletes are trained, as well as analyzing a variety of popular exercises such as bodybuilding to mass calisthenics, martial arts and military discipline to find the meaning of body culture in China. Brownell stated that "[b]ody culture reflects the internalization and incorporation of culture. Body culture is embodied culture" (Brownell 1995: 11). This is a similar view to that of Bourdieu, reinforcing the view that the study of the body can tell us a lot about the culture the person is in. The body is a powerful mediator of culture whether the individual is aware of it or not. Brownell sees

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<sup>8</sup> I use the term beauty salon in this thesis to refer to a beauty center, often equipped with machines claiming to produce beauty effects, offering services from facial, massage, body treatment, to slimming services. This is how such places are called in Hong Kong. This differs from the meaning of beauty salon in an American context where it could mean a simple area which people do their hair.

sport as a “public display of the legitimate body” (ibid.: 28).

Instead of looking at sports as a whole, Spielvogel (2003) has a narrower focus and concentrate on exercise inside Japanese fitness clubs. She looks into how Japanese consumers have given new meaning to the fitness clubs and how these places must veil the efforts and discipline required of exercise under a veneer of relaxation and luxury in order to succeed. This sheds light on “how local bodies interpret, challenge, and submit to normative ideals of leisure and labor, mind and body, and health and beauty” (2003: 6). In a similar vein, Maguire’s (2008) analysis of American fitness clubs discusses the meanings of such institutions in today’s American society. She argues that fitness clubs put bodies at the intersection of pleasure and discipline, with the heavy entanglements made possible by consumption (2008: 196). She asserts that fitness club membership carries central importance to one’s social status (2008: 62). A more detailed analysis of yoga studios applying ideas of Maguire’s will be found in chapter 4.

All of the above show that the body carries much significance which surpasses beauty and fitness alone; indeed, the body is a strong indicator of social class and social status, which we will examine next.

### *Theories on the Body and Social Status Representation*

Aside from reflecting on society, the body and sport can also have a strong association with social status representation. Yoga, with its combination of bodily exercise and philosophy, lies on the edge of sports. Displaying the body in sport is a perfect way for the upper class to exhibit their prestige, because it allows the best demonstration of the wastage of time, money and the display of pleasure (Veblen 2005[1899]). This act of conspicuously displaying their involvement in leisure activities is what Veblen terms conspicuous leisure, with leisure as “non-productive consumption of time” which has “no intrinsic use” and



“does not commonly leave a material product” (Veblen 2005[1899]: 22). This research is related to chapter 3, when I discuss the significance of a leisurely ambiance in yoga studios. Bourdieu adds to Veblen’s analysis and gives a more in-depth investigation of the relationship between sport and social class in various works such as “Sport and Social Class” (1978) and *Distinction* (1984). These two works form an essential basis of this thesis and are where many of my arguments are rooted. In these two works, Bourdieu stresses that sport is “an object of struggle between the fractions of dominant classes and also between the social classes” (Bourdieu 1978: 826). He also states that leisure practices themselves become important locators of social class (Bourdieu 1984: 310) as people from different classes spend different amount of time participating in different leisure practices. Thus knowing what kind of activities one does is already useful for identifying the social class of an individual. Bryan Turner (1991) focuses on the body itself as a marker of class. He proposed that the body is a mechanism for showing a change of status of the person; thus it is also why people may train their bodies to showcase their rise in social class. These theories concerning the body and class will be given further attention when we turn to chapter 5, where I look into fetishism of the body.

Sport participation patterns, including the degree of involvement and types of sport varies according to social class (Bourdieu 1978: 834-839, Scheerder et al. 2002, Jarvie and Maguire 1994, Sleaf 1998). It is found that sports participation rises with education level and class (Bourdieu 1978, Jarvie and Maguire 1994). Bourdieu (1978) stated that economic capital, followed by cultural capital and then spare time determines sports participation. Bourdieu further pointed out that these practices appeal to different social groups because of people’s distinctive use of the body. I agree to him up to this point, but I cannot agree with his idea that the working class tends to have an instrumental relation to the body (e.g. dieting and beauty care), that they engage in activities which require effort and involves



pain and suffering to improve the body to achieve a higher means. Instead, I contend that people of all social classes care about the body, and the image it projects. However, generally the working class does not see training the body to becoming fit and slender a top priority and has much time for it, thus they have a higher tendency to be fat compared to the rest of the population. In most developed societies, with the U.S. and Europe being the best example, the obese population is mainly those with the least income and education. It is the middle class who adheres to regimes that require much effort, with promises that if they endure it long enough, the slender body that they desire will be the result. However, the focus on the physical only increases going up the class ladder. According to Bourdieu (1978: 838), the privileged class appears to “treat the body as an end in itself” because they are the only ones to have the leisure and time to do so. Therefore sport activities can be used purely for glorification of the body for these rich people (Bourdieu 1978). However, I argue that a very different situation is found in Hong Kong, where the wealthier people are not engaging in pure appreciation of the body but such an image is precisely what they try hard to prevent. They often like to present themselves as being more interested in yoga philosophy and how yoga can bring calmness to the mind, and the soul. Although this is the case, these people from the upper-middle class and above are using the body as much as the rest of the yoga practitioners. How they present their expectation towards yoga can be seen as just a way to differentiate themselves from the popular rhetoric in the media picked up by the working and middle class, who treat yoga as a slimming technique. This will be further discussed in chapter 6.

Status connotations of sport participation differed over time. In earlier centuries, being able to do sport for leisure in itself was a form of distinction because of the low availability of “amateur” sports to the masses. In the second half of the twentieth century, mass participation in sports led to a decline in inequality in sports (Sleap 1998: 91); thus doing



sport in itself no longer offered much social distinction. Therefore the upper classes have come to acquire other ways to differentiate themselves, either through engaging in more exclusive types of sport or doing the same sport but incorporating some characteristics which are difficult to pick up by the masses. The latter strategy is what explains part of the yoga phenomenon in Hong Kong today, which I will illustrate in this thesis.

### *Body as the Site for Displaying Class*

Social class is one of the qualities we can understand through a person's body. Bourdieu (1978) points out that "it is the relation to one's own body, a fundamental aspect of the habitus, which distinguishes the working classes from the privileged classes" (1978: 838). The body is a physical site where class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and age are all embodied and practiced. He suggests that the respectable body is that of a white, heterosexual female, desexualized and often from the middle class. He asserts that

Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is, embodied, helps to shape the class body. It is an incorporated principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporation, choosing and modifying everything that the body ingests and digests and assimilates, physiologically and psychologically. It follows that the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste (1984: 190).

Many later studies reaffirm his view. In *Money, Morals, and Manners*, where the attitudes and lifestyles of the French and American upper-middle class are analyzed, some American respondents indicated that staying fit<sup>9</sup> is a way to manifest one's social class (Lamont 1992: 101). Beverley Skeggs, in her brilliant analysis of gender and class, points out the inseparable relationship between the two, arguing that "femininity is always defined through class" (1997: 95). Through studying working-class women in England, she found that they resent being identified as such. Thus they put much effort into passing as middle

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<sup>9</sup> The idea of a fit body has different definitions in the American and the Hong Kong context. A fit female body in an American context would be like that of Madonna's, with good muscle tone and little excessive fat. However, using the American definition of a fit body, few Hong Kong female celebrities could be seen as fit, as the actresses and singers have stick-like bodies and little muscle. Yet they are seen as fit by local media.



class through acquiring feminine attributes in how they dress or carry themselves. To them, working on their bodies is a form of investment and cultural capital, as they see the body ultimately as the only thing that belongs to them. Fat symbolizes immovability, and it is not only physical immobility but also has meanings in mobility along the social ladder (1997: 83-92). Although it cannot be generalized that all working-class women are uncomfortable with their class position, to a large degree this matches the idea of the body being a central signifier of class taste, as it is the body which they work on in order to pass as middle class. The intertwining nature of gender and class she proposes provides a new dimension for studying class:

Excess, waste and artifice combine to produce disgust at the working-class body, but a radical avant-garde value when attached to middle-class bodies, where excess is done with constraint (because they are self-governing, rather than beyond governance). (Skeggs 2004: 105)

I will turn to other arguments from her book in chapter 6 when discussing how people from different backgrounds invest in their bodies through yoga.

All the above shows that the body is a strong indicator of social class. This thesis will examine the analysis of body and social class representation in yoga to study how class and gender are experienced, learned and remade. Because yoga heavily engages the body, it becomes the perfect activity for studying class stratification in Hong Kong. Using ethnographic data and focusing on yoga to analyze how people from different background treat it, I test whether Bourdieu's and other analysts' theories apply in postmodern Hong Kong. But before proceeding to that, we must first look at globalization theories.

## **Theories of Globalization**

Yoga has been globalized and uprooted from its original Indian birthplace to become present in every major city around the globe. Before studying the globalization of yoga to understand how it has reached its current form, globalization theories need to be examined.



Globalization is the “intensification of global interconnectedness” (Inda and Rosaldo 2002: 2). It has traditionally referred to “the global circulation of western ideologies” (ibid.: 3). However, yoga has taken a new path. Instead of following the traditional direction of flow from center to periphery, yoga has moved, from periphery (India) to the center (the U.S. and Europe), and eventually to the semiperiphery (Hong Kong and other cities in Asia). Borrowing Inda and Rosaldo’s concept of de/territorialization, it is correct to say that cultural subjects and objects have been lifted from their fixed spatial locations and relocated in new cultural settings (ibid.: 12).

On the other hand, the idea of the global cultural supermarket looks into how identities are relatively free for individuals to choose from in this world of postmodern consumer society, where wealth and knowledge is the currency (Mathews 2000: 100). Like most other things, religious faith has also become an item available in this market. Mathews, through studying Tibetan Buddhism in the U.S., concluded that the faith creates “an alternative Americanness within an imported spiritual tradition” (Mathews 2000: 118), it is “Orientalizing Westernism” (ibid.: 118), because it is actually cultivating and reinforcing American values, despite looking extremely foreign. At the same time, its believers are mostly from the upper-middle class. This consumption of deterritorialized cultural practices has some similarity with yoga consumption in Hong Kong.

Despite the popularity of yoga in the Western world, the fear of the spiritual imperialism of India is almost unheard of. This is because imperialism is most often related to economic might; since India has little economic power, there is little worry over its imperialism. Although this may start to change as the Indian economy grows, it is not important for this thesis. On the other hand, yoga, in advocating universal spirituality, is not seen as competing with other religions or spiritual beliefs. Some Christian groups advise their believers against practicing yoga because it is seen as a form of Hindu worship, but

that force is minor and does not seem to affect the spread of yoga<sup>10</sup>. Beyond this, Inda and Rosaldo (2002) argue that fears of cultural imperialism and global cultural uniformity do not work anymore because the lines between West and non-West, center and periphery and “here” and “there” become increasingly blurred. The world has become a dislocated cultural space as global cultural power ceases to be concentrated in the West. Meanings comes from all places, and the world is no longer just

a monolithic core-periphery model but a complexly interconnected cultural space, one full of crisscrossing flows and intersecting systems of meanings.... (Inda and Rosaldo 2002: 26)

Thus the world, and globalization, should not be seen as lying purely in western hands, but is a global project. Although imperialism is not feared by the West, the concept of Orientalism may indeed be applied to yoga. When people outside of India engage in yoga, they often give it a sense of romance and exoticism (Said 2003 [1978]: 1). A similar association is applied to yoga in Hong Kong, and I argue that this is also Orientalism, irrespective of the fact that Hong Kong is situated further East than India.

Before progressing further into the analysis of yoga, let us first look at how yoga has been globalized, how it came from India to Hong Kong.

### *Globalization of Yoga*

The globalization of yoga is a good example of a new, multidirectional flow against the traditional uni-directional model purportedly leading to homogenization of the world. Using Appadurai's idea, yoga, which could be considered an ideoscape, was initially brought from India to the West through the travelling of Indian masters to conferences and workshops in the U.S. and Europe, by the traveling of actual people, which forms the

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<sup>10</sup> The Malaysian government recently banned the practice of yoga for Muslims because of its relation to Hinduism. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7743312.stm>



ethnoscapes (Appadurai 1990). However, in recent years the spread of yoga is especially facilitated by mediascapes, with figures like Madonna and the model Christy Turlington advocating it on a global level. Local models and celebrities raving about yoga have also contributed greatly to its huge popularity in Hong Kong. But the matter gets more complicated; as the popularity of yoga went up, yoga in the West in turn impacted yoga in India. Many yoga centers in India, which are highly commercialized, are tailored for Western practitioners. Many Western practitioners go to India to enhance their yoga practice and their yoga credentials (Alter 2004). Quickly, financescapes have also thrived as yoga has become a huge industry within global capitalism, with yoga ashrams<sup>11</sup> being set up in India mainly targeting tourists, yoga retreats and holidays, international yoga conferences being held in major world cities around the world, in addition to the setting up of yoga studios with branches in different countries. Yoga equipment, clothing, books and videos also become a big business.

Using Inda and Rosaldo's idea, yoga has also been deterritorialized, lifted from its fixed spatial locations—India—into new cultural settings: cities around the world, in well-furnished rooms with fancy mats and air conditioning (Inda and Rosaldo 2002: 12). A rich and poor divide also exist in the spread of yoga, between India and the West. Burger applied Weber's idea of salvation goods and religious markets to the modern history of yoga. The religious market was made possible as Swami Vivekananda, after participating in the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 to promote yoga to the West, "wanted to exchange (Indian) spirituality for (Western) material goods" (Burger 2006: 83). This is reinforcing the spiritual poor and material rich image, creating and reproducing the image of "spiritual India", consciously positioning itself as a spiritual country, providing a kind of spiritual salvation to the West through yoga.

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<sup>11</sup> Ashram is a spiritual yoga center, usually in India.

## **Why Yoga in Hong Kong**

The holding of major international yoga conferences such as the recent “Evolution Asia Yoga Conference” in Hong Kong proclaims Hong Kong’s status as Asia’s yoga hub outside of India. Studying yoga in Hong Kong not only complements the global development of yoga by adding an Asian perspective, it also sheds light on how a cultural practice from the East (India), is altered going further East (Hong Kong). After being Westernized, how does yoga localize in Hong Kong? How does yoga in Hong Kong compare to that in other major world cities? Hong Kong is of particular significance to the study of the globalization of yoga because it is a postmodern city, where consumer choice is everything and we have choices available from everywhere (Mathews and Lui 2001: 3). In the West, yoga was mainly for the New Age movement and is popular among the middle class. Looking at how yoga is represented in Hong Kong also offers new insight into comparing Hong Kong’s status representation to other places to bring out its particularities in social status representation.

Before doing that, it is essential to have a good understanding of social class in Hong Kong. The following section will discuss class in Hong Kong, a concept that is at times vague and indefinite.

## **Defining Social Class in Hong Kong**

Social class is an ambiguous concept in Hong Kong. It has been suggested that consumption defines one’s social class more than the individual’s background (Chan 2000: 126). Previous studies point to a complex class situation where scholars do not seem to find a common consensus as to the boundary of different classes. Earlier literature suggested that social class is not valid in Hong Kong as classes are internally fragmented and the members of the same class share different interests and outlooks (Lee 1982). It was



believed that individual merit is more important a criterion for achievement than status and social origin (ibid.: 56 and Lau and Kuan 1988: 64-7). However, as we will see in this research, this has changed in the last two decades.

Past studies have described the characteristics of a particular class without clearly defining what this means (Ma 2001, Lui 2003). This thesis does not attempt to contribute to making a more concrete definition of social class. It offers no attempt to define class in hard and fast terms. Instead I focus on describing the pursuit of distinction in order to gain social class standing and how it is done.

### *The Middle Class*

Of the different class categories, the middle class receives the most scholarly attention in Hong Kong society. They are said to represent the Hong Kong dream and have a distinctive lifestyle. However, even works devoted to discussing the middle class in Hong Kong offer no clear-cut guidelines as to what constitute middle-classness except occupation. A number of previous studies defined the middle class in Hong Kong following Goldthorpe's class scheme model, taking it as the service class, consisting of administrative, management and professional employees (Lui 2003, Lau 2002, Chan 2000). Social status representation and particularly the middle class receives much attention in Hong Kong because its presence is a recent phenomenon. Hong Kong was largely poor up until the 1970s, and the economy really started to take shape after the "phenomenal growth of the Hong Kong economy in 1945-1980" (Lui 1993: 248), only after that did the middle class start to evolve in the 1980s and 1990s. Lü and Wang (2003) found that this newly formed group received much academic attention for their distinctiveness. The middle class is new in this capitalist society, where their education background, professional qualifications, and social and cultural capital accumulated from work to gain better work and employment



distinguish them from the working class. Wong and Lui (1992 cited by Lau 2002) found that the demographic identity of the Hong Kong middle classes is very mixed, which shows that they have a strong social mobility. Lau (2002) found that in general, the middle class in Hong Kong are conscious of their own class identities, but their perceived identities are not homogeneous in nature. According to Lü and Wang (2003) they do distinguish themselves from the rest of the population, especially in terms of living standards and education level, and that view is also shared by Lau (2002). Nonetheless, Lau (2002) finds that there is no unique identification in terms of class background and cultural styles.

It is reasonable to be cautious about identifying the middle class as it could be a concept which different groups identify it from different perspectives. Ortner put it very directly that the concept cannot be viewed as an objective fact:

The plain “middle class” is the most slippery category...either used as the modest self-label for the upper-middle class, which quickly gives way to an acknowledgement that one is probably “upper” middle class after all; or it is the covering label for the lower-middle class (Ortner 2006: 71).

However, given the slippery interpretation by different parties, a broad class distinction can still be found in the U.S. based on money, occupation and education level. In Hong Kong, in the recent past, money was the most important factor for defining class. “Social class in Hong Kong has been based, quite nakedly, on money: the richer you are, the higher class you are” (Mathews and Lui 2001: 8). This is due to the rapid rise in the standard of living in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to the emergence of the middle class. However, the class situation has changed rapidly since that statement was made almost a decade ago, with the middle class becoming more established and getting bigger. Thus one’s social class is no longer solely determined by how much money one has; more sophisticated means have come about to assert one’s class standing, and displaying one’s cultural capital is a major way to do so.

As described by Mathews and Lui (2001), education and occupation only act as tools



to gain money. Nonetheless, in this thesis, all three factors, money, education and occupation will be taken as the dominant criteria for making broad class identification. Additional points from Mathews and Lui will be discussed in chapter 6 concerning spirituality and distinction.

### *Class Markers in Hong Kong*

Despite the ambiguity of the middle class and the near impossible task of drawing a line as stated above, there are some general attributes that many members of the middle class ascribe to in evaluating their social difference from others such as owning cars and having good English proficiency (Chan 2000: 125). They also differ from the working class by having a high tendency of living in self-contained private blocks (Lui 2003), more chances of overseas travel, and have higher chances to possess credit cards (Lui and Wong 1994: 73). Although owning a credit card has become much more common in the past decade and is no longer limited to the middle class, the other criteria for middle class still ring true to a large extent.

The young middle class shows a high tendency of insisting the difference between taste and having money, even though most people assume a high degree of taken-for-granted congruence between the two (Chan 2000). Chan believed that with economic recession, it was likely for some distinctive cultural capital to develop, which would highlight the difference between the groups within the middle class (Chan 2000: 128).

Although the middle class has received much scholarly attention, the upper-middle class is relatively new such that there has not yet been much academic research on it. Very few characteristics and attributes of this group have been discussed in previous research. Discussions such as Ma's analysis of alcohol consumption that shows the upper-middle

class in Hong Kong sometimes criticizes beer drinking and prefers red wine (2001: 130) are less than enough to construct a full picture of this newly evolving class. Yet, they can be defined roughly as those who were brought up in an at least middle class family, have received overseas education, speak fluent English and adhere to a Western lifestyle. They are unlike the upper class who are from traditional families and have inherited old money. In the past, the upper-middle class has been heavily white. Now, local Hong Kong Chinese are able to openly embrace a Western lifestyle, which a large number of them pursue. Money alone can no longer define social class, although most of those in the upper-middle class have substantial income which guarantees a highly comfortable lifestyle. However, income is far less than the only indicator of social class. The difference between middle class and upper-middle class, to a large extent, is marked by physical and spiritual yoga practitioners.

At first glance, it may appear that I am solely defining social class by the type of yoga a practitioner takes part in: if one practices spiritual yoga, then she/he is from the upper-middle class, whereas if she does physical yoga, then she belongs to the middle class. There is a problem in such a definition because there is not enough social data to define what the middle class, or upper-middle class in Hong Kong means. But popularly, we know that middle class is someone who is in their 40s or above is those with at least a high school education, works as a white collar and speaks some English. They have, in most cases, a relatively high income, which is a result of the above qualities the individual possesses. For the middle class who are in their 20s and 30s, they have a university education and speaks reasonable English. However, social class is not just about money or should money alone suffice as the marker. Education is highly correlated with occupation and income. When people receive an education from a good university and studying a professional, especially those in a prestigious university overseas, they often get jobs in multinational companies



and work in jobs which guarantee them a good income and status image. An overseas education is only affordable by upper-middle class families or above, which creates a cycle of the rich and privileged. Thus occupation and education provide another dimension to how social class can be defined.

Class is a multi-dimensional subject and cannot be determined by a single parameter. In this thesis, I am going to look at class mainly using income and education level. While income and education level largely determine social class, I assert that whether one practices spiritual or physical yoga has a high correlation to the person's social status, but there are exceptions. Not all of my informants who practice spiritual yoga are from the upper-middle class and there are those from the middle class who engage in spiritual yoga as well. However, engagement in physical or spiritual yoga are not the determining factor for defining social class. Practicing particular yoga, among other things like owning an expensive car, listening to classical music, drinking wine, could be an expression of social status, which is inherently linked to education and income.

### *Cultural Capital as Distinction*

While money alone was enough for social class distinction at the time when Mathews and Lui asserted that social class was bluntly based on money in Hong Kong (2001: 8), much has changed in the last few years. While the middle class was new and small in the 1990s, it has solidified in the last decade to becoming more established, and money alone has become insufficient for social class distinction. Therefore, more sophisticated means are needed to acquire cultural capital—knowledge of different subjects and ideas—has become a major class indicator, more apparent and useful than the mere possession of money. The 1997 economic crisis, which hit all of Asia and put Hong Kong into a major financial crisis, also had an impact on the transformation of the middle class. Chan (2000)

suggests that economic recession was useful in enabling the new middle class to exert their “taste” and create distinction for themselves, to dissociate taste from money (Chan 2000: 128). I believe that this “taste” distinction is gaining popularity and more importance for distinction as the middle class is enlarging. Following Bourdieu (1984), Chan states that “for cultural capital to gain its own legitimate currency, its distance from economic capital needs to be maintained” (2000: 128). I argue that as the class structure is cementing in Hong Kong; the middle class is gradually moving away from direct form of conspicuous consumption for distinction. Rather, they go into things that require more cultural capital, which has a less direct relation with money, to show their status. I take Lui’s position that “middle-class culture is only in its early stage of formation” (Lui 2003: 170). But I argue that since 2003, the time when Lui’s article was published, the formation of the middle class culture has picked up speed and a stronger socio-cultural identity has been found. According to Eric Otto Wear’s study of Chinese art in Hong Kong, cultural capital as distinction has little link to social class. Without money, the knowledge of art alone, he asserts, will not raise a person’s class standing. The distinction only carries indirect class meaning (Wear 2001: 196) but is nonetheless indicative. In recent years, cultural capital (knowledge of art in this case) has taken a more central importance in one’s social class distinction and its implications will continue to grow.

Although I argue that distinction is a core motivation driving people to do yoga, I do not mean that people are consciously pursuing distinction all the time. Following Bourdieu, I argue that people prefer to be looked up to, instead of looked down upon. They may not be consciously aware that they are engaging in status distinction acts. However, their unconsciousness does not weaken the distinction that the act itself brings. I will discuss this more thoroughly in the concluding chapter of this thesis.



## METHODOLOGY

In this research, I examine the ambivalent connection between spirituality and physicality through participant observation at a number of yoga centers, including commercial studios aiming primarily at weight loss and pursuing a perfect body, and quasi-religious yoga organizations that claim to exist for the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment, as well as those lying ambiguously in between. I conducted 18 months of participant-observation to better understand these people, and to know their behavior inside yoga studios. Interviews have been conducted with yoga practitioners who take yoga as an exercise, and those who treat it as a spiritual pursuit. I also interviewed yoga studio owners, and yoga teachers, including local, Indian and Westerners<sup>12</sup>. Through this, I hope to understand the relationship between the celebration of the body and spiritual enlightenment in Hong Kong.

Starting autumn 2006, I have been carrying out participant observation in two yoga centers in Hong Kong. I found their phone numbers on advertisements and called them up, arranging a time for a trial class. After trying the class, I joined the membership plan like any other member. Going to yoga studios and attending yoga classes has been central to my research because it surrounded me with a large pool of potential informants and it also allowed me to perform participant observation. Being in the same class allowed me to know teachers and fellow students, and enabled me to build friendships and select potential informants. Through engaging in classes and observing the interactions of people in and outside class, I received a good understanding of the dynamics of yoga practitioners and

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<sup>12</sup> I use the term “Westerner” here to refer to the group of people who are generally referred to as expatriates in Hong Kong. I avoid using the term “expatriate” because it may refer to those receiving an expatriate pay package, who have been employed in other countries to work in Hong Kong, and their pay package is much larger than that of the locals’, but that is not necessarily true for all Westerners in Hong Kong. “White” can also be problematic since it leaves out Hong Kong Chinese who have been born and raised abroad. Therefore “Westerner” seems to be the most appropriate term to use here. In the context of this thesis, I generally use Westerners to mean people who have grown up in America and European countries, regardless of their ethnicity.



thus came to know what yoga means to them. I went to these studios and classes around three times a week for eighteen months, talking to fellow students, instructors and other staff before and after class. I have attended more than 200 classes in total.

I joined a third studio, in July 2007 for one month because it represents a different image of yoga, yoga with a Western twist. The studio is smaller and carries a more spiritual image; it is owned by an Anglo-American, with one-third Western students. In addition, I joined a course at the “Workers’ Union Leisure Center”<sup>13</sup> which was held once a week, from June until September 2007. The course fee is cheaper and represents the lower end of the yoga industry. I also did participant observation in two spiritual yoga places: the temples of the “International Society for Krishna Consciousness,” and “Raja Yoga,” to better understand a more religious interpretation of yoga spirituality. These provide good comparison with the spiritual yoga offered in commercial studios. Multi-sited ethnography is particularly useful for this research because it helps me understand a broad spectrum of people who are engaged in yoga to have a fuller view about different interpretations of yoga. Joining a few studios allows me to meet informants with different expectations towards yoga so as to give a more comprehensive view on how people practice and perceive yoga in Hong Kong.

My fieldwork was largely conducted inside the confines of yoga studios or in spiritual yoga centers, because some of these yoga practitioners spend a substantial period of time in these places. I chatted with them and conducted extensive interviews. At times, we went out for meals, shopping, and swimming, and one of them even read tarot cards for me. I have also attended yoga events with my informants. All these allow me to have a better understanding of the informants outside of the structure of a formal interview. Given the

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<sup>13</sup> Workers’ Union is a guild for various industries and the leisure center is famous for providing budget leisure classes for the masses. It offers all kinds of leisure classes for a minimal price, and has been offering yoga classes for 30 years now. Currently, there are up to 600 students enrolled in their yoga courses at more than 30 outlets in the city.



nature of the topic, there is no obvious reason for my informants to lie to me. However, in interviews they may be more hesitant in answering questions concerning status and class. Thus instead of asking direct questions, having interactions with them beyond the compound of yoga studios allowed stronger bonding with my informants and allowed them to interact more naturally with me. At the religious yoga centers, I talked to the faithful to learn about their attitudes towards yoga and their religion. Through attending their events and worship, I built rapport with the informants in order to get a more in-depth understanding of their belief and practice.

On the whole, I conducted 33 formal in-depth interviews. Aside from yoga practitioners, I also interviewed yoga teachers from different yoga studios and of different ethnicities, as well as owners of studios. In addition to fieldwork, I conducted textual analysis of the Hong Kong *Yoga Journal*, a new publication with its first issue released in November 2006. Media reports on yoga and advertisements of yoga have also been kept close track of. I also went on [discusshk.com](http://discusshk.com), the top online forum in Hong Kong, to find out how people discuss yoga there. Through this, I can have a well-rounded view of what concerns yoga practitioners in Hong Kong.

Pseudonyms have been used for the informants to ensure their anonymity. I use real name for persons and studios for public information including the history of yoga in Hong Kong in chapter 2. However, to prevent inadvertent advertising for yoga centers, I make an attempt to shy away from identifying the name of studios in the later chapters by using pseudonyms for places where I went and people I met to prevent people from finding out the specific place and person to intrude their privacy or to benefit or bring negative publicity for particular studios.

An appendix including information about the informants, such as gender, age, education and occupation is included at the end of the thesis. Such information provides

important clues as to the social status of individual informants. As I will illustrate in the thesis, this has a strong correlation with their inclination towards practicing physical, or spiritual yoga.

## **PERSONAL STATEMENT**

I initially started doing this research because I was trained as an athlete when I was young and always feel the need to exercise. I am also a very nervous person. My aunt Rose, in whom I have seen how yoga has made her into a more open and happy person, inspired me to engage in this project, to find out what lies under this mystical exercise that is talked about so much. Through investigating the meaning of yoga in Hong Kong, I have tried to bring in the underlying intricacy behind the recent yoga boom largely constructed and shaped by commercialization and economic incentives.

My strongest feeling through this research is that yoga, originally taken as a leisure exercise for people to relax, has become a stressful pursuit for me. Aside from being a yoga student and following the teacher's instruction in class, I also had to make sure I remembered what the teacher said in class to collect data for my research. On top of the complexity of being a participant-observer, I was also searching for my own belief. Reading about yoga as an immense philosophical system, I started off dismissing people who do yoga purely to lose weight or to beautify their body, because they do not take yoga "seriously". I experimented with vegetarianism, hoping to cause less violence to the world and be healthy. I tried to find a balance between my "yogic life" and the rest of my social life, straddling the opposite poles so as not to become too extreme. Gradually, through getting to know more people who try to seek spiritual enlightenment through yoga and through the constant reminder of my supervisor Gordon, I became more open and came to the realization that everyone is finding what they want from yoga, whether it be physical,



spiritual, or both, and no judgment needs to be made. Everyone is just trying to find what matches them best.

Doing this research has also allowed me to have a more open attitude towards different religions. Being brought up as a Catholic, I initially felt awkward going to the spiritual yoga places looking at statues of Krishna in the yoga temple and when I first went to the religious yoga associations. Over the time, I grew accustomed to both and became more at ease facing the statues of Buddha, Ganesh and Hanuman on the altar of yoga studios and religious deities in spiritual organization. On the whole, this research has made me a more accepting person, when facing others with a wide range of beliefs and different attitudes towards yoga, and life. I believe that is what studying anthropology is all about, avoiding ethnocentrism and being open to a wide range of people, ideas and beliefs.

On top of that, I went through major emotional turbulence in the summer when I was conducting field work. I found refuge in yoga, and tried my best to focus in yoga class despite the efforts being largely in vain. I dove into a long process of soul-searching and self-enquiry, which is somehow encouraged by yoga. A famous quote from the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* says: “yoga is the control of the fluctuation of the mind,” as my first yoga teacher told me. It struck me deeply as I am known to have major mood fluctuations and this has become my most memorable and favorite quote. Despite my best effort, I still find that state extremely distant and almost impossible to attain. However, understanding and keeping in mind that phrase has allowed me a better awareness of myself, and to be more observant of my mood.

Doing this research and engaging in yoga has allowed me this personal journey. I give my deepest gratitude to everyone whom I have met during this research, who most willingly shared their views and opinions with me, patiently answering my questions and caring about my research, and about me as a person. I am also glad that I have made many

friends during this research.

On top of research, yoga has benefited me on multiple levels. I learnt from yoga that only through loving and taking care of myself could I learn to love other people. Also, as someone with a history of bulimia, I found that practicing yoga has totally lifted me out of this obsession and self-destruction. It may have been my new stage of life as a graduate student, new friendships or yoga; I cannot tell for sure, but I am sure yoga has done part of this, as much scientific research has proved. Without sounding like preaching, I do want to share my view that yoga has done me much good. If nothing else, my friends all say that my body has become more slender!

## **STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

In order to better understand the meaning of yoga in Hong Kong, many factors have to be taken into account. I have divided the thesis into seven chapters; dedicating each chapter to a specific area of yoga that contributes to the analysis of body and spirituality in Hong Kong.

Looking at the historical development of yoga enables us to understand the manifestation of yoga in Hong Kong at its present state. Chapter 2 traces the significant events from yoga's first arrival in Hong Kong five decades ago to the well-established billion-dollar yoga industry now. This chapter matches the development of yoga with governmental policies and events in Hong Kong in recent years. The chapter also gives an introduction to the fieldsites where I conducted my participant-observation, which is also where my interviews took place.

In chapter 3, I turn my attention to how huge yoga studios, characteristic of Hong Kong due to their luxurious facilities, make yoga unique in Hong Kong. By discussing the distinctive features of these studios, I look into how they become a space for leisure,



facilitating the construction and display of conspicuous leisure (Veblen 2005[1899]). I discuss how studios consciously construct a leisurely yogic ambiance, as a place for relaxation and fun. I go on to investigate how discipline in yoga studios is ultimately a form of distinction in itself to give a sense of prestige for “serious” yoga practitioners. I argue that the perfect balance between relaxation and discipline is what gives yoga studios in Hong Kong such popularity.

After investigating the significance of yoga studios in constructing senses of social distinction, it is important to look into how people behave in these studios, as I examine in chapter 4. I seek to understand how people’s behavior in yoga studios and the ethnicity of teachers affects the meanings people attribute to yoga. People have different attitudes towards yoga, as indicated by the different verbs they use to describe the act of engaging in yoga. At the same time, a variety of relationships exist between teachers and students that have distinctive effects on how students treat yoga. As yoga is originally from India, the ethnicity of teachers has a large effect on the presentation of yoga and its meanings in Hong Kong. In this chapter, I find out how ethnicity affects the prestige and respect a teacher receives. At the close of the chapter, I argue that the ethnicity of teachers is also a form of distinction, carrying class connotations.

Having said that yoga has become fetishism of the body in Hong Kong, chapter 5 is devoted to examining how this is put into practice. First, I investigate the image of yoga in the media and advertisements to show how the body is often the sole and prime focus. Then, I analyze real cases in yoga studios to bring out how people fetishize the body. Borrowing theories from Bourdieu and Baudrillard, I argue that there are more than aesthetic reasons for the pursuit of a perfect body; instead, it is a way to attain distinction (Baudrillard 1998: 131, Lamont 1992: 101, Santo 2002: 191, Skeggs 2004: 102). I argue that people fetishize the body in yoga because they want to be seen as being from a higher class as a slim body

is a middle class ideal.

Chapter 6 focuses on how and why spiritual yoga is a form of social distinction. This group of yoga practitioners differs from those who do purely physical yoga by having received more education and being more from an upper-middle-class background. They can explain endlessly the benefits of yoga to their inner being or to the world, but often reduce the discussion of the bodily effects of yoga to a minimum. The different ways they demonstrate spirituality as a form of distinction is analyzed through looking at their different yoga practices. In this chapter, I consider whether they have really transcended the body or if it is ultimately a form of distinction to differentiate themselves from the masses who do yoga purely for physical reasons. I found that the net effect of their spiritual and physical yoga practice is that they exert more control over their body than those physical yoga practitioners. Thus they are indeed engaging in another form of body fetishism. The different degree of distinction carried by body and spirituality is also weighed and the heavily intertwined relationship between the two is explored.

Examining the above questions can help us to understand class and status representation in Hong Kong, with yoga as a tool. At the same time, we can understand how spirituality and body, health and beauty, leisure and labor, tradition and modernity, are valued in Hong Kong. Chapter 7 gathers the essence of the previous chapters and provides insights to future research concerning yoga as well as social class representation in Hong Kong.



## Chapter 2

### Yoga in Hong Kong and its Historical Development

Before looking at the current manifestation of yoga in Hong Kong, it is important to understand how it has developed into its present state. Looking at its historical development can help us comprehend how and why it is what it is now. There are few written records on the history of yoga in Hong Kong and even senior teachers at major yoga studios know little about the local historical development of yoga. I have interviewed several medium-scale studio owners, who are Westerners, usually North Americans, and a few older local yoga teachers, who are in their 50s to 80s, to collect this information. This oral history may at times be fragmented and laden with personal interests and ideologies. But I try my best to stay neutral and present a comprehensive view, despite the possibility of missing out on certain details.

Yoga came to Hong Kong through two different paths, through Indians and through Westerners. The first wave came 50 years ago with Indian swamis staying in Hong Kong for a few months, teaching the local “upper class” and some Indians yoga. The second wave, a more indirect flow, came to Hong Kong through the Westerners who reside in Hong Kong and brought their yoga practice, learnt in the “West”. They started giving lessons here, also to the fairly well-off. These two waves are significant and have a major influence on the present yoga situation in Hong Kong. Altogether there are three main phases in the history of yoga in Hong Kong, characterized by the ethnicity of the teachers: Indians in the 1950s, Westerners in the 1980s-90s, and the hybrid stage now. To investigate the development of yoga in Hong Kong, real names of studios and teachers are given, since

effective disguise would be impossible, and in any case, unnecessary.

## THE 1950s INDIAN WAVE

Yoga arrived in Hong Kong in the 1950s with the Indian yoga masters, who stayed and taught for a few months. The following account is that of Fung Wai Shing, one of the students of the Indian masters at that time, who went on to start classes at the “Workers’ Union Leisure Center”, a grassroots leisure center providing a large variety of classes to the mass public. I also spoke with Fong Fai, one of the most famous teachers teaching “traditional yoga”<sup>14</sup> in Hong Kong. This man in his mid-50s is the president and teacher of “The Yoga Association of Hong Kong”, a yoga center, whose master, Law Chau, who was also taught by the Indians, was one the most famous teachers in Hong Kong during the 1970s and 1980s.

As early as 1954, there were Indian masters coming to Hong Kong to teach. Swami Vishnu-Devananda<sup>15</sup>, who is believed to be the first, came to Hong Kong in May 1956. The first yoga class took place on June 1 of that year at the Hindu temple in Happy Valley. This was the result of Fung Kung Ha<sup>16</sup>, one of the earliest yoga practitioners in Hong Kong, who visited India to ask Sivananda<sup>17</sup>, a prominent Indian yoga teacher to send a student to Hong Kong to teach. Hong Kong was Swami Vishnu-Devananda’s first stop in the global tour to promote yoga to the world. It is believed that the Harilelas<sup>18</sup>, the richest and most influential Indian family in Hong Kong, arranged it. They are believed to have made the

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<sup>14</sup> “Traditional yoga” is a laymen label of one of the yoga styles in Hong Kong, taught by locals, usually middle-aged teachers, purely in Cantonese. A more detailed analysis of the different yoga styles will be discussed in chapter 4.

<sup>15</sup> As the successor of Swami Sivananda, Vishnu-Devananda found the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers, one of the most popular yoga schools in India. <http://www.sivananda.org/teachings/teachers/swamiji/swamiji.html>

<sup>16</sup> Fung Kung Ha is a learned master of Buddhism, Taoism and *The Book of Changes*, primarily used for fortune telling.

<sup>17</sup> Swami Sivananda is one of the best known yoga masters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Now there is a style of yoga named after him. <http://www.sivananda.org/teachings/teachers/sivananda/sivananda.html>

<sup>18</sup> The Harilelas are the best known Indian family in Hong Kong. They are dominant figures in the business world, and own a lavish mansion in Kowloon Tong and are Sindhis, who are the major contributors to the Hindu temple (White 1994: 125).



travel arrangements, organized the classes and venue, and provided accommodation for the Indian masters. The family hosted the masters in their family's extravagant mansion in Kowloon Tong (White 1994: 125) when some Swamis came to visit again in the 1980s. It is believed that they have spread the word among the "upper class" (quoting from Fong Fai) so that many of them joined the lessons. Attendees in the lessons included family members from Sir Robert Ho Tung's<sup>19</sup> family, some rich local Chinese with various jobs such as *taichi* master, athlete, physiotherapist, doctor, martial artist, high-ranking officials at the police, businessmen, well-learned journalists, and a few Indians as well. Although the Swamis taught for free, *laisee*<sup>20</sup> was given to the Swami, which often contain a sumptuous amount of money. Classes usually consisted of around 20 to 30 students. Law Chau, then a famous Chinese medical practitioner and *taichi* master, learned about these lessons from his famous clients and was able to participate in the lessons. Vishnu-Devananda's style of yoga was mainly physical, concerning the health benefits of specific poses. He taught in English, but the granddaughter of Sir Robert Ho Tung acted as an interpreter, translating into Cantonese for those who did not understand English. The Swami stayed for around three months and later traveled to Australia, the U.S., Canada and other countries, to teach yoga. He made repeated visits to Hong Kong in the following few decades.

Several other Indian yoga masters came to Hong Kong in subsequent years. Sri Swami Satchidananda<sup>21</sup>, nicknamed the bearded guru, came to Hong Kong to teach in 1959. Having an emphasis on yoga philosophies, he returned to Hong Kong several times afterwards, the last time being 1988. At that time, as the classes were so exclusive, it was a clear form of status if one could be in the class. To know about yoga at all was a form of

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<sup>19</sup> Sir Robert Ho Tung was a famous businessman and philanthropist in Hong Kong.

<sup>20</sup> Giving out *laisee* is a Chinese tradition. It refers to a red envelope, with money inside, usually given from elders to unmarried/young people during Chinese New Year or other festive seasons.

<sup>21</sup> Sri Swami Satchidananda has traveled the world to teach yoga. The Harilela Family once commented that "He made a highly significant contribution for the upliftment of humanity and succeeded in spreading the message of universal love and brotherhood to make the world a better place to live in."  
<http://www.swamisatchidananda.org/docs2/biography.htm>



prestige.

Not many of the wealthy students continued to practice yoga after the Indian masters left, yet some of those who were not very well-off but from the middle class, including Fong's master Law Chau, took yoga seriously and continued to learn. On August 14, 1960, Law became the head of Sivananda yoga in Hong Kong. The initiation ceremony was held at the Hindu temple in Happy Valley. As there was no proper accreditation system for yoga teachers at that time, Law's recommendation was highly useful in enabling him to teach in courses held by the government. Law started teaching yoga at the "South China Athletic Association", a laymen's sports club, for the government<sup>22</sup>, and at community centers, in an effort to popularize yoga for the masses. But he also gave lessons at his home, with around ten students each class. He charged \$300 for four classes for "ordinary" people, and \$500 for the rich students. At the same time, he was charging \$30 per person for four classes at community centers. At that time, a breakfast cost as little as 5 cents.<sup>23</sup> There were both men and women in the classes and they were usually middle-aged. Aside from Law, a few of the other students who learned from the Indian masters also started teaching at various places.

Fung, a student in these classes taught by Indians, is now a retired engineer in his eighties. He started yoga courses at the "Workers' Union Leisure Center" in 1980 and has given private lessons to a few celebrities from the entertainment business. He and a group of local practitioners used to meet with doctors to discuss yoga postures and the benefits of each pose to the human body. The first local book on yoga was published in 1967 (Mak 1967) and the second published in the next year (Cheung 1968), with Fung and his group making a major contribution. These books summarize the health benefits of each posture to the body, after discussing them with Chinese and Western medical doctors. They are purely

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<sup>22</sup> Courses were held under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

<sup>23</sup> According to my mother, who was a teenager at that time.



physiological in focus and there is no mention of yoga as a philosophy.

Fung, like most of the yoga practitioners at that time, saw yoga as a form of exercise for training the body, especially in terms of breathing and flexibility. On top of yoga, Fung taught many kinds of martial arts including *taichi* and *qigong*. Fung told me that at that time, he and the other local practitioners made a conscious attempt to make the physical postures of yoga easier and more balanced, to suit it as an exercise for relaxation.

The 1970s-80s did not see a major development in the yoga scene. It is estimated that there were only a hundred or two hundred devoted students of yoga in Hong Kong throughout these years. The Indian style of yoga was passed on to local teachers, and taught in private lessons to the rich, and at the same time, to more ordinary people in community centers. But there was no mass appeal for yoga. The handful of yoga teachers did not communicate with one another and taught independently. Fong attributes this to the conflict between the few local teachers as they all struggled to get more students. Once Westerners came to Hong Kong to teach, Fong had little knowledge of and no communication with them. However, the Western wave had a significant impact on the yoga scene in Hong Kong, as we will discuss next section.

In 1981, the “International Yoga Institute” was opened in Ho Man Tin by the “International Society for Krishna Consciousness”. The center teaches physical yoga heavily laced with spiritual philosophies. It later moved to its present location in Tsim Sha Tsui. In the same year, the “Brahma Humaris World Spiritual University”, commonly known as “Raja Yoga”, also opened in Hong Kong, by a group of Sindhi women (White 1994: 170). This spirituality emphasizes meditation and does not offer physical yoga. However, according to the broad definition of yoga by Patanjali, it does fall into the category of yoga. Both of these religious groups cannot be directly linked to physical yoga but some physical yoga practitioners with long experience and strong devotion to physical

yoga do become followers of these groups.

## **THE 1980s-90s WESTERN WAVE**

Although the yoga scene was dominated by locals in the earlier years, in the late 1980s, a few Westerners from English-speaking countries started coming into the scene, bringing with them a Western-modified form of yoga. Classes were held in dingy flats or on outlying islands, and yoga was still considered quite alternative (Gluckman 2006a). Wong, a male local yoga teacher in his fifties, used to teach locals at the “Alternative Lifestyle Society” around 1997, a site gathering local New Age fans, selling health food like alfafa. The society, originally in Wanchai, has now closed down.

There was little contact between Western and local teachers. Sravaniya de Pecoraro, an American woman who has adapted a Sanskrit name, came to Hong Kong in 1989. She is believed to be the first certified American yoga teacher to teach full-time on Hong Kong Island. To her knowledge, there were only two other teachers in Hong Kong at the early 1990s, one of whom was Jan Moor, a British-born Chinese who started teaching yoga in Hong Kong in 1984. She said that at that time there were less than twenty yoga teachers in Hong Kong that she knew of, all of them were Westerners. Later, more local teachers started coming into the picture and she said they charged less. Although she refused to say how much she charged, she revealed that she has been charging the same amount for more than 20 years. Thus it can be seen that yoga has been going down in prestige, at least in the circles these teachers teach in, as inflation should have brought up the price.

The fact that local and Western teachers targeted a different audience may explain why they did not mingle. Western teachers gave lessons to a rich, English-speaking group of students whereas local teachers taught in community centers and governmental organizations to a very different social group. Lessons by Westerners were offered in



private clubs such as “Clear Water Bay Golf Club”, “Grand Hyatt Club”, the “Spa” at the Excelsior Hotel, the “Hong Kong Cricket Club”, and the “Aberdeen Marina Club” as well as at less exclusive places such as the YMCA, where locals usually go to classes. The first yoga studio owned by Westerners is believed to have been “Yoga Central,” which opened in May 1999 on Wyndham Street in Central (<http://www.yogacentral.com.hk/>). “Yoga Limbs” also opened at around the same time, as did “The Celestial Wishing Tree Studio”, later called “The Iyengar Yoga Center of Hong Kong”. In the same year, “The Yoga Society of Hong Kong” was formed, an organization gathering yoga teachers and enthusiasts (Shevloff 2006). Monthly workshops and gatherings were held, inviting teachers to share and exchange their yoga knowledge. The group was largely limited to the Western teachers and practitioners and had no contact with the local teachers. Only later, near 2000, when Dickson Lau, a local Hong Kong Chinese yoga teacher, was invited to conduct a workshop, did the two groups “find” each other. He brought a group of students with him, who were all locals. Shevloff remarks of her surprise at finding such a large crowd of local practitioners during an interview. However, little contact continued thereafter between the Western and local yoga communities. This could be seen as a demonstration that the clientele of the two groups did not intersect and thus there was no need for competition or collaboration. Since the Western teachers conducted classes in English which were usually held in private clubs, it is safe to assume in this Hong Kong context that the student population was restricted to the rich and educated. On the other hand, the local yoga teachers targeted a less elite group, a local audience, taught in Cantonese at community centers, carrying little distinction. Thus there was not a unified image of yoga at that time.

At about the same time, local yoga institutions were also set up. “The Hong Kong Yoga Association” was established in 1986 by Dickson Lau according to his website. The “Yoga Association of Hong Kong” was established by Fong Fai in 1988, as he inherited the

studio (originally named Law Chau Yoga Association) from his master, named after Fong's master (Leung and Chan 2007). These associations are little more than a name to claim authority or simply a yoga center to attract students. They have not exhibited a major function in promoting yoga to the masses or uniting the yoga community.

By the late 1990s, large fitness centers in Hong Kong started offering yoga to students in group classes. Along with this, local teachers started learning the Western style of yoga, as we will now discuss.

## **THE COMMERCIAL YOGA BOOM**

Towards beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the popularity of yoga started to surge, perhaps following its popularity in the U.S. The omnipresent media coverage of celebrities like Madonna, Christy Turlington and Sting advocating the benefits of yoga had a huge effect in bringing yoga to the public (Betts 2005). Yoga classes at the "Workers' Union" started becoming more popular and yoga gradually became less confined to the elite. In the year 2000, studios reported a sudden surge in demand; all found that they could not keep up. Student had to wait outside the classroom hoping someone who had booked the class would not show up so that they could get in. At the same time, yoga classes became a necessity in local gyms.

The real yoga boom started in 2002 with the opening of two massive chains which brought in a large number of international and Indian teachers. In 2002, "Pure Yoga" opened in Central, becoming the first massive yoga studio in Hong Kong. Its luxurious setting, large scale and prime location marked it as distinct from the other studios in Hong Kong. Its lavishness was also unprecedented in the world, according to many of my informants, who are foreign yoga teachers in Hong Kong and have extensive experience in yoga globally, as we will discuss in detail in chapter 3. "Pure Yoga" now has five studios in



Hong Kong, occupying the best locations in the busiest business districts and is the largest yoga chain in Hong Kong. Based in Hong Kong, the chain now has opened studios in Singapore, Taipei and New York City. A gym, “Pure Fitness”, was also opened under the same group after the success of “Pure Yoga”. The teaching staff is mainly Westerners with an increasing number of locals.

“Planet Yoga”, a rival chain, was opened in 2003 by the boss of “California Fitness”, a fitness chain. It carries a discreetly different image of yoga by playing up the ethnicity of its Indian teachers. The studio is made to resemble an Indian ashram. It is the sister company of “Bikram Yoga”<sup>24</sup> in Tsim Sha Tsui, another yoga studio with a patented hot yoga sequence, a 45-minute yoga class consisting of a fixed series of yoga postures, conducted in a strictly controlled and structured environment—in a classroom heated to 40.5 degrees—claiming to have the effect of healing some illnesses. It has over 800 branches worldwide. “Planet Yoga” opened a women-only club in Causeway Bay in mid-2007.

### *Major Events Marking Yoga's Development*

Although the SARS outbreak in 2003 caused many studios to lose customers, the pause was only temporary. The number of studios only continued to go up in the post-SARS period. Many large commercial studios were set up and billboards advertising yoga were seen everywhere. In August 2003, the first “Yoga Fest”, a non-profit yoga event, was held at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center, arranged by Ruby Ong of

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<sup>24</sup> “Bikram Yoga” was closed in June 2007 when the group that owns “Planet Yoga” discontinued to provide the patented yoga in the studio. Rumors has it that the owner of “Planet Yoga” decided not to continue paying the patent fees thus causing the dispute. The name of the studio was changed, and the teachers were fired. Subsequently they replace it with their own hot yoga and teachers, and their hot yoga is the reverse of the original sequence, but starting in the opposite direction. Some members are unhappy because they have joined the center for the patented “Bikram Yoga”, which is a specific yoga sequence conducted in a room of 40.5°C and 40% humidity, consisting of 16 postures and two breathing exercises, all done in identical manner guided by trained instructors who give a specific dialogue. It has centers all over the world and celebrity students include George Clooney, Madonna, and Michael Jackson amongst others. Some members of the originally “Bikram Yoga” in Hong Kong took to the streets in protest and a lawsuit is still going on between some of the members and Planet Yoga for a breach of contract since they are no longer offering the patented yoga series. The center changed its name to “Planet Yoga Hot”.



“Reflections Bookstore”, a New Age organization. Yoga demonstrations and talks were held. The Hong Kong edition of *Yoga Journal* published its first issue in November 2006 to take advantage of the yoga boom. The “Evolution Asia Yoga Conference” held in June 2007 solidified Hong Kong’s position as a chief Asian yoga hub. The conference was organized by “Pure Yoga”, the largest yoga chain in Hong Kong. This was the largest yoga conference ever held in Asia. The four-day conference gathered more than 2,000 students from around Asia and 40 world-famous teachers, a scale unprecedented elsewhere, according to some conference attendees. Despite its name, it was more like a yoga camp than a conference in the academic sense; participants showed up in the flashiest yoga clothing and lined up to buy the latest yoga fashions.

A few notable figures have contributed to the popularity of the yoga scene in Hong Kong. Almen Wong, a former model and actress, is one of the owners and teachers and the spokesperson for “Pure Yoga”. She has appeared in numerous events and advertisements. Kamal, the owner and star yoga teacher of “Planet Yoga”, is another well-known figure behind the popularization of yoga in Hong Kong. A native of India, he came to Hong Kong to teach in “California Fitness”, a large fitness center chain in the late 1990s and quickly became a sensation, he was widely talked about and attracted many students to his class. The owner of “California Fitness” at the time, seeing the potential of yoga in Hong Kong, financed him to open “Planet Yoga”.

Aside from the commercial forces behind it, yoga’s development coincided with the government’s promotion of exercise. The “Healthy Exercise for All Campaign” was launched in April 2000 to promote sports participation and increase people’s awareness of the benefits of exercise in Hong Kong. A program jointly organized by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and the Department of Health, the Cantonese version of the slogan 「日日運動身體好，男女老幼做得到」 *yaht yaht wahn duhng san tai hou, naahm*



*neiuh louh yau jouh dak dou*<sup>25</sup> (“Daily exercise keeps us fit, people of all ages can do it”) became a catchphrase in Hong Kong. The campaign aims at raising the public's interest in exercising and encouraging them to exercise regularly. Large-scale promotional activities, festivals and schemes have been held (<http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/healthy/b5/index.php>). At the same time, the government also started promoting the idea of a knowledge-based economy in 2000, encouraging “lifelong learning”: (<http://english.people.com.cn/english/200003/01/eng20000301N105.html>). It stressed that knowledge, brain power, or innovative human capital are worth more than physical or financial capital. Although it discounts physical capital, this is a way to promote spiritual yoga.

In addition to health concerns and the desire for knowledge, from an economic perspective, the yoga boom, coming a few years after the economic downturn in 1997, fits with Chan (2000)’s discussion of the class situation in Hong Kong. Chan asserted that during economic recession, the identity of the middle class have been lost their through conspicuous consumption alone; thus they hope to establish themselves through engaging in “tasteful consumption”. Yoga, with its stylistic image portrayed in the Western as well as the local media, and more importantly, with its vast system of philosophy, is one such example. The recession gave “an opportunity for ‘taste’ as a form of cultural capital to figure more prominently amongst the new middle class as a means of social distinction and for carving out their subjectivity” (Chan 2000: 128).

Although SARS in 2003 led to a halt to the booming yoga scene, it quickly picked up after the pandemic had gone. SARS had the effect of raising people’s health awareness, thus increasing the popularity of yoga. At the same time, attention to health is also part of class identity, as “the pursuit of health has become an important activity, especially for the

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<sup>25</sup> All Cantonese Romanization in this thesis is according to Yale Romanization, with reference from *Chinese-English Dictionary* <<漢英小字典>>.

American middle class” (Crawford 2000: 219). I argue that such ideology is not limited to the U.S. but is applicable to Hong Kong as well. Thus health concerns, adding to taste and class symbolism, all propelled yoga’s development in Hong Kong.

### **Characteristics of Yoga in Hong Kong**

The historical development of yoga in Hong Kong has created a unique yoga scene which is not found anywhere else. According to Martin, a yoga teacher from Scandinavia, who has taught in North America before coming to Hong Kong, there is nowhere like Hong Kong, where studios occupy up to five floors in one building, with ten classrooms. “Yoga in Hong Kong has exploded from nothing, to such a huge fashionable trend. There is such a strong focus on the body. Within this process, some essence may have been lost,” he said. Eva, a practitioner from England, who has been in Hong Kong for six years and teaches yoga part-time, said that yoga studios in London, Paris, Singapore and major Australian cities are outnumbered by those in Hong Kong, and are much smaller. The biggest studio in the U.K. has three classrooms whereas the biggest in Hong Kong has ten studio rooms. Facilities in Hong Kong are also more professional, she said. They are suited to the busy lifestyle of people, providing towels and showers, catering to a crowd that needs to rush in before work and get to other places quickly after class. The showers in Hong Kong studios are the best in the world, Eva explained. Indeed, yoga is more upscale in Hong Kong compared to elsewhere.

With the rise of yoga’s popularity, studios in Hong Kong have developed specialized styles, providing consumers with more choice in the yoga supermarket. Cardio yoga is a 40-minute aerobics classes supplemented by 15 minutes of yoga postures to stretch out towards the end of class. Golf yoga has also been invented in a studio, with claims to improve one’s range of swing on the golf course. De-stress yoga, back care yoga, slimming



yoga, and detox yoga are some other variety of yoga offered in Hong Kong. Office yoga is also a newly introduced yoga type, catering towards the office ladies and white-collar clientele. All these types of yoga are utilized for physical ends, mostly associated with improving body image.

Another feature of the yoga scene in Hong Kong is that the people work particularly hard at it, and are remarkably dedicated. This is perhaps not unrelated to the slimming hype that studios offer. Eva said that when people in the U.K. say they practice yoga, they mean they do it once a week, but in Hong Kong, “where I teach, I had to tell people to practice only six times a week and take a day off. People have a frantic attitude towards yoga”. On top of working longer hours, people in Hong Kong also go to more yoga classes per week, and they push themselves much harder in classes. According to Eva, they look at the person next to them in an extreme pose, and tell themselves, “if she can do it, I can do it!” Eva thinks it fits well with the “work hard, play hard” mentality in Hong Kong. She finds that in the yoga community in Hong Kong, there is a strong bonding, as people spend substantial time at the studio and often go for meals together after classes. All in all, people who do yoga are much more from the mainstream and less from alternative/New Age followers in Hong Kong, as is often the case in other places.

Christine, an American lady who has lived in London, told me how yoga in Hong Kong is much more physical. “I’ve never been to a yoga class (in London) where I felt like I didn’t need to also go for a run or a hike. Here in Hong Kong, we sweat through a tough *vinyasa*<sup>26</sup> practice...” Indeed, yoga is often treated as the latest gym workout or seen as a physical craze (Gluckman 2006a). Many people come into yoga classes expecting to sweat and feel exhausted after a class.

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<sup>26</sup> *Vinyasa* refers to the flow of yoga postures and the movement, in Sanskrit.

Despite its unique development, the popularity of yoga cannot be seen as a single isolated fitness craze in Hong Kong. Two decades ago, an aerobics fad not dissimilar to this swept through Hong Kong and attracted a huge female following. A few of the yoga practitioners I interviewed were steadfast aerobics fans, attending classes a few times a week dressed in the most fashionable aerobics outfit, before they switched to yoga. The popularity of aerobics in Hong Kong started during the early 80s and lasted until the mid-90s.

Deborah Sims, an actress in Hong Kong contributed much to the popularity of aerobics, and is referred to the “aerobics queen of Hong Kong”. She opened a few fitness centers offering aerobics classes and starred in a series of aerobics videos for people to learn the exercise at home. Variation of the original such as jazz aerobics, also appeared in the market to attract customers.

The popularity of aerobics during the 80s and 90s has striking similarities with the yoga trend in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: both are heavily marketed to be concerned with weight-loss and are popular mostly amongst women. Their popularity is introduced and propagated by celebrity from the entertainment business after the exercise gained huge popularity in the West. Also, both trends target the middle- class. While aerobics was popular among women, working out in the gym was the norm for men, and that has remained the same over the years.

Comparing the yoga trend with the aerobics fad puts yoga in context to demonstrate that like aerobics, yoga is a fitness craze, carrying meanings in the changing societal context.



## MY FIELDSITES

Yoga in Hong Kong is all about commercialization and reinvention. From the two paths through which yoga has arrived in Hong Kong: from India and from the West, two yoga traditions have been established, and local teachers have become teachers under the two styles. The huge popularity of yoga in Hong Kong in the last five years has largely to do with the second path, yoga propagated through the West. For physical yoga, I have chosen four major fieldsites to cut across the different variables, including ethnicity of the teachers and social class, in order to tease out the intricate relationship that affects people's goals in yoga, whether it be development of the body or spirituality. Two of these were large scale private clubs, another is small and spiritual and the last one is public. In addition to physical yoga studios, there are also places offering a different take on yoga, yoga as a spiritual entity, I have also done research in two of these places.

Let me introduce the fieldsites one by one. "Feel Yoga", located at the center of a busy commercial district, was opened in 2006,. It claims to be the biggest yoga studio in Asia. There are more than 15 yoga teachers, most of them local females, but there are also three Indian male teachers. The "face" of the center used in advertising by the studio is a young local female yoga teacher with a sweet face and a slim, toned<sup>27</sup> body. Its décor resembles a Japanese spa resort with much wood and stone being used and there is plenty of space for members to spend time in. It is the subsidiary of a major fitness gym chain. In addition to yoga classes, it offers a large variety of classes including dance, karate, kickboxing, belly dancing and spinning<sup>28</sup>. There are more than 40 shower cubicles and a sauna room in the changing room. The fee for a full membership for one year is around \$700 each month. All

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<sup>27</sup> "Toned", according to the dictionary's definition, refers to the healthy functioning of the organs in the body. However, in the Hong Kong context, it has little relation to the inner conditions and total health of the body. It simply refers to "muscle toning", a state of condition, as explained by the website, is a lean body favored by females. This is explained on the page <http://exercise.about.com/cs/weightloss/a/toning.htm>. While men go to the gym to build muscles, women go to the gym looking to "tone their bodies", to get a slim body and a very slight muscle definition.

<sup>28</sup> Spinning is group exercise class, where students and the instructor ride on bike machines together.



classes are free for members once they have paid the membership fees.

The second fieldsite is in Central, the business hub of Hong Kong. “Yoga India” has an Indian ethnic feel, from the ashram décor down to the teachers. All 14 teachers except two are Indian males and 90% of the classes are conducted in English. It markets itself as teaching “authentic” yoga and has two other centers in Hong Kong. The chain also has branches in other Asian cities such as Bangkok. It is one of the first large-scale yoga studios established in the city. The center boasts of its large variety of yoga offered, including a more aerobic style invented by the teachers as well as some supposedly classical yoga. “Yoga India” comprises four classrooms on four floors in an office building. The capacity of the four classrooms is around 120 students. There is a small sitting area outside the reception and there is also a long couch outside the changing rooms where members sit and chat. A one-year membership costs around \$500-\$600 monthly, and with the membership one can go to an unlimited number of classes.

Unlike the first two massive scale yoga centers, the third site is medium in scale. With three small classrooms, it can house 80 students. “Yoga Inn” is located near Central in a residential district. It gives a spiritual atmosphere with images of Ganesh, Krishna, Shiva and Buddha hanging on the green walls of the two-storey compound. In the largest of the three studios, overlooking Victoria Harbour, there is an altar with a Buddha’s statue. In addition, there is also a board with a quote of the day and also pictures of yoga postures and photos of lotuses. All these help create a spiritual ambience. There is a small lounge area where local yoga magazines are on sale as well as other books concerning fitness and well being. There are only around 15 classes a day. The monthly fee is around \$500, inclusive of all classes.

The fourth fieldsite is not specialized in teaching yoga but is a public leisure activities center. It offers the widest range of leisure classes in Hong Kong for a minimal price.



Classes ranging from ballet and flower arrangement to life-guard training and an introduction to the mainland legal system are offered. The particular location where the yoga class took place is located in an old industrial district, San Po Kong, with many public housing estates nearby. When not conducting yoga classes, the room is used for dance classes. Different from the other three fieldsites which are studios especially dedicated to yoga, the facilities in this studio are more basic and less clean. At the same time, the classes here work on a course basis; the yoga course contains 12 lessons, instead of the unlimited class access in the three private studios that are also my fieldsites.

Aside from the commercial centers focusing on physical yoga, I also went to two places with yoga as a religious pursuit. Although not necessarily linked to physical yoga, some of the faithful at these places do practice physical yoga. The “International Society for Krishna Consciousness”, more commonly known as the Hare Krishna temple, is referred to as the “yoga temple” by some yoga practitioners. It is situated in Tsim Sha Tsui in a residential/commercial building. There are two statues of Krishna at the front of the hall and a small room for holding yoga classes adjoining the temple. Devotees, as the followers of the movement are called, come for lectures and also for vegetarian meals. They also offer yoga classes but not many of the devotees practice physical yoga. The second spiritual yoga center is called “Raja Yoga”, located in Tin Hau, where a form of open-eye meditation is practiced. The décor is all white to give a serene feeling. Physical yoga is not practiced but some followers of this religious group are physical yoga practitioners. The philosophy they promote is similar to the more prominent yoga philosophy but is more extreme. For example, they emphasize detachment from the social world and relationships with other people and a form of strict vegetarianism, even prohibiting garlic and onions, as those food are believed to arouse desires.

Aside from these major fieldsites, I also went to different studios to try out their

classes. I attended yoga events in different locations in order to gather a more comprehensive view of yoga in Hong Kong. Although I did not spend a long period of time in “Yoga Sanctuary”, another mega-size upscale studio, I did attend a number of their yoga functions and events, and data from that studio will also be drawn upon in this thesis. In the coming chapters, I will illustrate the yoga situation in Hong Kong, with particular attention to the apparent contradiction between body and spirituality, and more importantly how yoga has become rendered a tool for social distinction drawing from daily life examples from these fieldsites.



## **Chapter 3**

# **Yoga Studios: The Construction of Difference and Distinction**

In order to create a yoga atmosphere that will be enticing to customers, yoga studios put much effort into constructing a place with special qualities. To successfully construct a yogic atmosphere, yoga studios need to strike a good balance between leisure and discipline. This chapter investigates how such equilibrium is achieved. Hong Kong's yoga boom in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was brought about, and accentuated by these commercial studios, characterized by their gigantic scale, luxurious environment and teachers from all over the world. The presence of such establishments speaks about Hong Kong and conveys unique meanings to practitioners in Hong Kong. Thus, focusing on the particularities of these studios, this chapter hopes to better understand how the meaning of yoga is manifested and created in these arenas. An in-depth analysis of these places provides insight into how distinction is brought about by the construction of a special yogic ambience in these studios.

### **FEATURES OF MEGA STUDIOS IN HONG KONG**

Since 2002, giant yoga studios have been set up in Hong Kong. They often boast of their size, and of providing a comfortable and relaxing environment, convenient location, a large variety of types of yoga offered, and a large number of classes available. These features render them unique in the global yoga scene. "This is perhaps the defining Hong Kong yoga studio – part five-star spa, part exclusive country club. Top designer yoga gear

sells in the lobby boutique and sweeping floor-to-ceiling windows offer harbor views otherwise only seen in board rooms” (Gluckman 2006b). This is indeed echoed by many of my informants, who are long-time yoga practitioners and have extensive yoga experience around the world. I have come across two studios in Hong Kong which pride themselves as being the biggest in Hong Kong or Asia. According to Martin, a teacher from Europe whom we met in chapter 2, this city has the most overcrowded yoga studios in the world, at the same time, these crowded studios are all over the city, he said that nowhere else would one find such density of yoga studios and in such scale and lavishness.

At the same time, yoga studios differ from studios in other places where there are studios specializing in one type of yoga, such as Iyengar, Ashtanga, and Anusara. Large-scale studios in Hong Kong offer a large variety of classes. One studio boasts of the 30-plus types of classes they offer, and all large studios have more than 15 types of classes on their weekly schedule. The main studios are all situated in the center of main commercial districts, and within walking distance from subway stations. Being conveniently located offers much competitive edge because time is a luxury in Hong Kong.

Where money is a blunt reference for distinction, the service and ambience of the studio more acutely show the prestige of a studio. The more money you pay for the club, the more relaxing the environment and the better the service.

### *Range of Yoga Classes in Hong Kong*

Yoga is offered in a wide range of places in Hong Kong: in fitness centers universities, community centers, private studios, and in the home. Complimentary yoga classes are often provided in mainstream fitness centers. In universities and community centers, classes are offered as a course, consisting of 10 to 12 lessons that amounts to \$50 per class. Private studios differ much in price, from \$300 to \$1,000 for a month after



signing a contract and paying a one-time membership fee of around \$500. Customers then have unlimited access to classes offered in the studio. These studios differ in price and scale, depending on the facilities in the studio and also the teachers, with those taught by locals and in Cantonese being the cheapest, and those taught by Westerners and Indians being the most expensive. The most upscale yoga studio in Hong Kong is located in a recently-opened five-star hotel. It costs more than \$1,300 if one only subscribes for one month and \$1,000 if one signs a 12-month contract, for unlimited access to the classes.

### *Sales Strategies*

Aggressive sales strategies are characteristic of the yoga scene in Hong Kong. This, combined with the marketing and advertising of yoga, demonstrate how yoga is rendered a product. Most big yoga studios in Hong Kong are either opened by fitness centers or have themselves opened fitness centers. The membership subscription scheme is copied from that of fitness centers and customers need to sign at least a 12-month-long contract and pay monthly fees. For some studios, membership consultants are stationed on the street to give out handbills to attract potential customers. Sally, an avid practitioner who transferred to a big commercial studio because the small studio she practiced in closed down, feels sick of the sales techniques they use at the center:

They try to grab me every day after class (at the reception), and whisper into my ear that they have a special deal for me. They tell me I need to join the new plan now since it is the last day of promotion. Their prices keep changing, and they always come up with better deals each time. I'm really tired of them.

However, not all studios have equally aggressive sales strategies. Indeed, studios have different policies towards the openness of their prices. I have found that the more upscale a studio is, the more open it is about its prices, and the less overt and persistent its sales strategies. The majority of the studios offer a free class for trial and they hold special offers in conjunction with credit cards and sportswear companies to promote the studio. In

addition, yoga studios sometimes hold open-house functions hoping to attract potential customers. Also, they often have an extensive referral program to get existing members to recruit new members. Existing members can get monthly fee waivers or gifts if they introduce friends to join. In addition, young male membership sales staff are also employed to attract female customers. The aggressive sales strategies of fitness center chains and yoga studios are infamous in Hong Kong as can be seen in online discussion groups.

### *Location/district*

Central, the commercial hub of Hong Kong, is the district most densely packed with studios. It is where the two big yoga chains opened their first outlets. One yoga center, originally situated in Central, moved to Sheung Wan, a nearby district resided in by locals because of a rent rise a few years ago. The studio owner said that move caused her to lose a number of clients. Some prefer to stay in Central “because it is flashier”. The difficulty of classes sometimes also differs between districts. The biggest yoga chain, “Pure Yoga”, has five outlets in Hong Kong. Its Central studio offers the most advanced classes taught by the more experienced teachers, whereas the studios over in Kowloon, especially the one in Mongkok, an inexpensive and crowded shopping/business district, have a large number of local teachers and mainly beginners’ level classes. This shows a yoga hierarchy resembling that of the power/economic landscape in Hong Kong, symbolically reflecting how yoga aims to attract the rich and powerful in Hong Kong.

### **Studio Space for Leisure**

Yoga in Hong Kong may include “lavish facilities atop penthouse suites and entire floors in five-star hotels” (Gluckman 2006b). Such facilities and decor are the obvious marker of social distinction; and the more exclusive (thus more expensive) a studio is, the



more effort goes into creating the atmosphere. Studios in Hong Kong are lavish compared to those in other places. Eric Levine and Colin Grant, owners of the two biggest yoga chains, “Planet Yoga” and “Pure Yoga” in Hong Kong, also emphasized how yoga is different in Hong Kong. Grant said his chain is referred to as Louis Vuitton of yoga and Levine said that Hong Kong has the caviar of yoga (Gluckman 2006b). The scale of yoga in Hong Kong, along with the facilities in yoga studios, surpasses that in most major world cities.

A yogic ambience is important for the studios, and particular features are necessary in making the yoga studio distinctive. The following is a good illustration. Walking down the stairs of “Yoga Feel”, one becomes surrounded by a construction of wood, stones and bamboo that is the interior of the yoga studio. Located at the basement of a commercial building, the studio has a wall of water mimicking a small waterfall at the reception, and you are greeted by a few young, smiling receptionists dressed in beige. It is apparently trying to resemble a Japanese spa resort. It shows deliberate efforts to create a feeling of “oasis” in the bustling district, and salesperson cannot wait to point out that the air has been purified in this underground establishment, located in one of the most polluted districts in Hong Kong. In the big membership lounge, members can sit and relax and read newspapers and magazines and go online. The whole studio is also fitted with wi-fi so that customers can have access to the internet on their own computers. These are intentional efforts to make the studio a place to linger and spend a prolonged period of time, as opposed to galleries or malls without seats in order to keep the crowd moving (Greenberg 1996: 351). The fact that the studio has gathered 5,000 members in its first year of opening, a record-breaking figure in the city<sup>29</sup>, shows that this strategy is well-received.

On top of being a place to exercise, the spacious and comfortable environment of this

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<sup>29</sup> According to my “membership consultant” after I joined the club.

studio, as a leisure space, works especially well in Hong Kong given the limited space at home for most people. Tak Nan, a cashier at a nearby mahjong entertainment club, goes to the studio almost every day before work, sometimes just to take a quick shower because it is more comfortable there. Aside from the quality of the teachers, the comfortable environment is a major reason she chose this studio over the small yoga center she first learnt yoga in. “At that center, you can only be there five minutes before and after class. There is no place to sit and nowhere to relax. Here, I can come and read newspapers and magazines, I like it here,” said the woman in her mid-50s and mother of two. Like her, many housewives go to the studio during the day, taking one or two classes and spending the whole morning or afternoon there. These studios become a second home for these people. This is intentional, according to Jean Ward, program manager of the studio (Ferretti 2008: 114). The same meaning is attributed to fitness clubs in Tokyo according to Spielvogel (2003: 74-75), where women may treat as a refuge from the burden of housework and responsibility for the family. The design of yoga studios is like that of shopping malls in being a novel spatial and cultural form with the spatial characteristics of both leisure spaces and commercial sites (Shields 1992: 6), but unlike shopping malls, the more upscale yoga studios are designed to make people stay, while the cheaper studios are usually not providing space for people to linger.

### *Liminality and Yogic Ambience*

Victor Turner describes leisure activities as having liminal qualities—set off from the norm—and from the social structures represented by the working world (Turner 1982: 40). Theoretically, it can bring in new social structures by allowing people to experience brief period of detachment from daily life, in which they can examine their customs and habits, and choose new ones and discard old ones if they wish. Although the effects may



not be as dramatic as Turner describes, when people go to yoga classes, this liminal quality is exactly what the “yoga ambience” is about. This detachment from the external world and having a space and time outside of the mainstream social structure is what yoga studios play up to attract customers.

Studios are carefully constructed to make them places set off from the social structures of daily life, although in other ways, such as the pursuit of social distinction, they are not set off. How studios specifically do this forms the basis of how customers make choices between the studios. Even details such as smell and music have been paid close attention to. “Yoga Sanctuary” has green tea shower gel; there is lemongrass scent at “Yoga India”, the Indian studio, which gives a hint of exoticism; the purified air in “Feel Yoga” somehow gives the air a sweet taste. Teachers are required to light candles, or burn aromatic incense during classes in “Yoga Inn”. Music is also used to create a particular ambience. Indian music is played in “Yoga India”, music resembling chanting sounds is played in “Yoga Sanctuary”, and some relaxing music, of ambiguous origin but sung in English is played in “Feel Yoga”. These are all conscious effort to create a distinctive liminal space. Considering the décor, scent and music, since yoga comes from India, Indian ethnicity seems to play a role for creating a special yoga ambience. However, it is curious that given the Indian roots of yoga, Indian ethnicity is not played up as much as one might expect. This is further investigated in chapter 4.

### **Hygiene as Prestige**

In order to create the ambience that yoga studio is outside of the usual world and hence a hint of liminality, the cleanliness of the studio is also one of the basic requirements. As the spotless environment in studios provides a noticeable contrast to the polluted environment in urban Hong Kong, hygiene stands out as one of the major features of these

yoga studios. Just like new art galleries in the U.S., sterility has also become a feature for the modern yoga studio. In art galleries “walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically” (O’Doherty 1999 [1976]: 14-15). This is almost an exact depiction of “Yoga Sanctuary”, the most upscale yoga chain in Hong Kong. Aside from the spotless floor and walls, the mats inside the studios are also cleaned with disinfectant between every class by a team of janitors. The more upscale the studio, the higher the standard of cleanliness maintained. Although most mainstream studios in Hong Kong provide students with mats, in the U.S., people usually bring their own mat, and mats are also provided for drop-ins. Dermatologists have seen a rise in skin infection in the U.S. for patients who use public mats when doing yoga and only some fitness studios disinfect their mats every day (Ellin 2006). The hygienic standard is thus lower compared to that in Hong Kong. All mainstream/upscale studios in Hong Kong provide mats for students which are disinfected after every class and the floor is cleaned every day. Thus, on a practical as well as symbolic level, hygiene is a form of distinction.

On a practical level, yoga studios need to be clean since people are encouraged to walk around with bare feet inside the studio<sup>30</sup>. Shoes are generally forbidden inside the studio classroom, and usually banned from the corridor linking the changing room to the classroom. This enables a relaxing feeling, and is symbolically connecting people to their more natural self. Aside from this, members put down their shoes, mobile phone, bag and clothes in the locker and change into yoga clothes. All in all, this symbolizes leaving one’s daily life and strife inside the locker room, to have time in the yoga studio completely for

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<sup>30</sup> Large-scale yoga studios have a similar basic layout but each of them is different. All of them have a reception desk at the front, where one’s membership card is swiped for access and then it leads to an alley to the changing room, which may or may not be next to the classrooms. However, there is usually an area outside the classroom where no shoes are allowed. The more expensive the studio, the more likely the classroom is in a secluded area which people would only reach after going through the changing room. This ensures that the people near that area has been changed into yoga clothes and are bare-feet, or wearing flip-flops.



oneself, free from all distractions. Once I had a teacher start the class by telling students,

You're not supposed to bring your phone into the studio. Even if it has been switched to silent mode, it could still affect the magnetic field in the studio, which subsequently has an effect on the energy. Once inside the studio classroom, we should not be connected to the outside world. You shouldn't be checking whether the Hang Seng Index has reached 30,000, or be mad that your boyfriend hasn't called you.

This shows a deliberate effort by the studio to create itself as a special space—a sanctuary, with liminal qualities, undisturbed by the outside. This seems to be an effective means of attracting customers. And this is facilitated by the cleanliness, which contrasts with the polluted urban environment outside.

Hygiene is a practical concern that carries distinction. I have witnessed a middle-aged female student coming to the studio with rashes on her face to complain. She was fuming, and kept repeating, “I need to complain, I need to complain!” She said that the mat she used in class the previous day had irritated her skin, which had become red and itchy. She complained about the cleaning staff not doing a proper job and that some people wear their shoes until they are right outside the classroom—an area marked as shoe-free by the studio—thus contaminating the classroom. Her complaint about other people not following the rules strictly is at the same time showing that she knows the proper way to behave, whilst others do not.

Sometimes practitioners carry a yoga mat with them to the studio. This seems to be making a statement that they see the mats used by other people, and being cleaned after every class, as not clean enough for them. This addresses a practical concern over hygiene but also differentiates them from the other yoga students, and could be seen as a form of distinction.

On top of constructing a relaxing studio environment with liminal qualities, the studio also purposely creates a mood that yoga is for fun. “玩瑜珈”<sup>31</sup> *wuhnnyùhgà* [“playing yoga”] is the term often used by studio staff and salesperson to highlight the fun side of yoga, and this verb for the practice of yoga seems unique to Hong Kong. A more detailed range of attitudes of students is discussed in chapter 4, but I mention “playing yoga” here because this locution sheds light on what the studios try to contribute to the yogic ambience. “玩” *wuhn* [“play”]<sup>32</sup> suggests an informal and playful manner towards yoga, treating it as a form of leisure activity. “What do you want from playing yoga?” sales representatives often ask upon the customer’s first visit to the club to try out the class. When members arrive at the club, the smiling receptionist sometimes greets them, “Oh, you’ve come down here to ‘play’ again?” This rhetoric of “play” is well accepted, and is taken up by members at the yoga studio. Kary, a woman in her mid-forties working in the garment industry, who has been going to the yoga studio for one-and-a-half years, said, “I come down to ‘play’ three times a week. After ‘playing’ yoga, my back pain has eased. I no longer need to go to massage to relax my muscles.” But these same people may also say they “do” yoga in a different context, sometimes almost interchangeably. “I gain much satisfaction from doing yoga and feel very comfortable after class,” Kary added. Even people who do not participate in yoga are influenced by this ideology. From what I have gathered, about half of them say “play” when referring to yoga, and the other half use “do”. Encouraging people to use “play” for yoga could be seen as an effort on the part of the studio to veil the

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<sup>31</sup> “瑜珈” is sometimes written as “瑜伽”.

<sup>32</sup> According to the dictionary, this term means “to play; to play with”, or “to amuse oneself with”. It suggests an unserious attitude. Although “play” is the most direct translation of the Chinese term, the Chinese term covers a different range of meaning than in English. For sports, in English, one could say “play tennis, badminton, volleyball... (or any other ball-game)”; however, in Chinese, it is not common to say “玩” *wuhn* [“play”], but “打” (to beat; to strike; to hit; to smash; to dash; to attack) is used instead. “玩” *wuhn* is not used for referring to a specific ball game and carries a strong disposition of playfulness.



necessary hard work required in class and creates the image that yoga is for fun, and the studio a playground, to attract the city dwellers who want to find refuge from the stressful lifestyle of Hong Kong.

These yoga studios try to create an impression that owning a membership in the yoga studio is a form of distinction; thus they reckon that the social status the membership carries is useful for attracting customers, or at least that is the impression they try to create for prospective members. This is correct; however, they are not aware of the more intricate distinction that arises between members of the same studio. Portraying an image that one who “玩瑜珈” *wuhnyùhgà* [“playing” yoga] may gather little distinction, especially compared to, and as seen by, those who are serious practitioners, who “practice” (said in English) yoga. However, perhaps from an economic perspective for most studios, the strategy of playing up the fun side of yoga is wise as it can attract a large group of people who are mostly concerned with exercising while having fun (and gaining social distinction, perhaps without being consciously aware of it). This makes up the vast majority of the members in yoga studios in Hong Kong whom I have met. Only in the more upscale studios, which try to attract a more elite audience who pride themselves on being “yoga practitioners,” would they be concerned about the degree of seriousness instilled into the image of yoga and the studio. To this group of yoga practitioners, the “play element” only carries negative distinction.

### **Conspicuous Leisure**

The relaxing ambience, as well as “playing yoga,” points to a fact that the studio is emphasizing leisure over work. Indeed, the concerted effort to create a leisure experience has additional usage. Having the time to go to yoga studios and engage in leisurely activities is a form of conspicuous leisure, showing off how much time one can spare on

leisure, which is the “non-productive consumption of time”, has “no intrinsic use”, and “does not commonly leave a material product” (Veblen 2005[1899]: 22). As leisure is particularly treasured given the fast pace of life in Hong Kong, conspicuous leisure is an effective form of distinction. Twenty years ago, Laurent found that those with little education and do manual labor are less likely to engage in physical exercise compared to those with more education (1987: 360-89), which depicts the link between education, social class, and sport participation in Hong Kong. This seems to maintain a large degree of validity today.

Sport is a perfect way for the upper class to exhibit their prestige, because it can best demonstrate the wastage of time and money, as well as the potential pleasure from these activities through the conspicuous display of involvement (Sleap 1998: 90-91). This statement does not necessarily apply to all sports. It closely applies to yachting and polo, which require much expensive equipment to start with, and take at least a day at the sea or on the range, making them good sports for exhibiting one’s wastage of time and money, thus displaying upper-class identity. However, not all sports receive the same degree of social distinction. For example, weight-lifting took a long time to be recognized as an Olympic event because of its lower-class image (Bourdieu 1978: 836). Yet, the line is not so clear-cut and is slowly changing. Sports can carry different social status connotations under different situations. Although yoga is not a sport, it does carry much similarity with sport. Yoga, only available to the rich people in Hong Kong when it was first introduced in the 1950s, carried much distinction in itself. However, the distinction has lessened after yoga became popularized. A leisurely image also adds to yoga practitioners’ exclamation about how good they feel after yoga, makes it a good example of leisure. Yoga also suggests a larger purpose—spirituality and health—which is another important feature of leisure (Veblen 2005[1899]: 89). The comfortable setting of studios further legitimizes the



leisure experience. Spending time in these places is in a sense showing off how much free time one has to the other members of the studio and also to friends and family who know one is spending time at the studio, making the leisure “conspicuous”.

In Central, the business and financial hub of Hong Kong, where there is also the highest density of yoga studios, it is common to see women, mostly in their late 30s to 40s walking around during the day in their yoga pants. They presumably have well-to-do husbands, or else have jobs with flexible hours which allow them to stroll around leisurely in the central business district when most other people are working. This can be a good display of conspicuous leisure, especially when they are often dressed in yoga clothing and pants which look like fashion items, and displaying their slim bodies at the same time.

As conspicuous leisure is a strong form of social distinction as we have seen in the last paragraph, it is necessary to hear how practitioners at the studios discuss leisure. Many people who have joined these studios complain about how they are too busy to frequent the studio, while those who can spend much time there almost seem proud that they can do so. Mandy, a young-looking 60-year-old administrative staff in an insurance company often goes to the studio for two to three classes every day. Once she proudly told me that she attended seven classes<sup>33</sup> on a public holiday. “I told the teacher that I was going to seven classes. It’s like I was working here ... (giggles) but I wasn’t tired.” She sounded happy, almost proud. I asked how she managed, and she went on to explain that she was taking naps in between classes and three out of the seven classes were dance classes, which were not physically demanding. Emphasizing that she was not tired and that she enjoyed the classes is an attempt to reinforce that it was indeed leisure. Mandy is a stark example of Skeggs’ (1997) study of how lower-class women may put much effort into passing as middle class through working on their bodies. Although Mandy is middle-class by her

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<sup>33</sup> Yoga classes in Hong Kong generally last for one hour unless otherwise specified.

current income level and her lifestyle—being an administrative staff in a large multi-national company and spending much time in yoga studios and gyms—she did come from a poor background. Now that she has time and resources to work on her body, she spends much time doing it to distance herself from her past and to show her rise in social class, which matches with Turner's analysis (1991). She often tells me how she has made much effort and worked very hard for her family and at work to achieve what she has attained now. Mandy usually goes to the studio six days a week, and takes an average three classes every time. On top of being a diligent yoga student, this can also be seen as an ongoing effort to delineate herself from her working-class past and embrace fully her current middle-class status.

Mandy has a son and a daughter, both married, and she has just become a grandmother. She and her husband live in a private estate and go to church regularly. She sometimes cooks for her husband after work and has dinner with him before heading to yoga. She once left home after quickly finishing her dinner as she wanted to get to a class by one of her favorite teachers. It made her husband angry and she had to stay home for the next day to spend time with him. But most of the time, she could just come to the studio and spend hours there. Her husband often goes to play golf in mainland China during the weekend and she often accompanies him. She would read her yoga books while he plays golf, she told me. "He has his golf, I have my yoga. I have worked so hard all my life. Now it is time to do something for myself," referring to her practice of yoga. This shows how yoga as a leisure activity gives her a sense of identity apart from husband and family:

I have made that decision to be with this man, my husband. I had to sacrifice. Life was not easy... I can only work as an ordinary administrative staff at the company, because my husband is also there. He is more senior. I don't want to draw too much attention to myself.

Yoga as enjoyment and a display of leisure she considers well-earned. Having worked hard all her life, she now has the disposable income and time to do yoga. To an



extent, this is a justification towards displaying her leisure through yoga, a good tool for displaying her social status, which she considers she has earned herself. Therefore, Mandy's leisure in yoga, despite its apparently simple nature, may not be as pure and as relaxing as we might think at first glance: other motivations may be involved.

As we have seen, not all leisure is highly prestigious. Leisure has to be displayed and enjoyed in moderation, and with much tact in order to gain social distinction. It is important not to overdo it, or else the person may risk losing the prestige from leisure, or even gain negative distinction. Being in Hong Kong, where time is money and personal credentials often depend on the productivity of a person, leisure can be a tricky matter to display. Bonnie, a retiree, goes to the studio for one to two classes every day in the early afternoon, after going to *yum cha*<sup>34</sup> with her husband. Then she goes dancing with some friends in the afternoon. Mary, a married middle-aged woman, gave an implicitly disparaging comment towards people like Bonnie when she told me about her frequency of coming to the studio. She said, "I wish I could come more often and have a class every day. But I'm not a housewife or retiree. I don't have that much time. I need to work; I can only come twice a week". Although not making it explicit, there is a sense that she has a degree of disdain towards those who do not need to work. Thus it seems that leisure has to be displayed in moderation, and especially by people who are not always free, in order to gain social distinction and prestige. Mary and her husband usually come to classes together—three times a week, twice during the week and once during the weekend. They have no children and started yoga four years ago, citing health reasons as their main motivation. When talking about what she eats for dinner after evening yoga classes, she told me and her fellow classmate that she eats some bread and soup prepared by her Filipina helper at home. Kary, her classmate, remarked, "Oh, you're so fortunate to have a domestic helper prepare

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<sup>34</sup> *Yum cha* (飲茶) a way of eating out, common in Southern China. This takes place in a Chinese restaurant, where people have tea and small portions of food, in dumpling shape, called *dim sum* (點心).

soup for you. I don't have soup prepared for me at home and I have no soup to drink. I usually just take some bread or crackers after class." Kary, the woman who readily describes how she "plays" yoga, works in the garment industry. She lives in a private estate and goes to yoga five days a week on average. Compared to Mary, who has a helper at home to prepare meals for her, Kary's leisure is less supported, as she cannot simply go home and enjoy a meal but needs to spend time and effort to prepare it herself. This demonstrates that leisure is more than the act of going to beautiful yoga studios for yoga but is also reflective in other areas of life. Doing yoga is just one way of displaying leisure, other areas of life need to complement it for it to become a significant form of distinction.

Kary's husband also goes to the yoga studio, but unlike Mary and her husband, Kary seldom goes to the studio together with her husband. He can only go over weekends as he works in the mainland during the week; even during the weekend they go to the studio at different hours and do not go to the same classes. They have a son who is studying at a university in the U.S.; thus Kary does not need to take care of her family. At the yoga studio, she has friends whom she can talk to and spend time with.

All these cases seem to show that working people, who can still spare time for leisure, receive more social distinction for their leisure than those who do not work. Moreover, if it is supported by a comfortable lifestyle, like having a helper at home to prepare food and clean the house, this draws even more admiration and the leisure seems to increase in value, and become more justified. On the other hand, people who have too much spare time, like the retirees who are no longer producing in society, enjoy less respect and distinction for their leisure. Thus conspicuous leisure depends very much on the context and differs from case to case.



## *Discipline vs. Leisure*

Leisure seems to be the opposite of discipline and effort; however, these yoga studios seem to include both discipline and leisure. This section looks into how the perfect balance between discipline and leisure is struck in these commercial studios. As we have seen, yoga studios try to portray themselves as a place for leisure. The situation is unlike Japanese fitness clubs, where people's refusal to put effort in classes has led to the decline in popularity of these clubs, which may lose out in popularity to beauty salons, as described by Spielvogel (2003:23). She attributes this to the fact that at Japanese fitness clubs, usually seen as places for relaxation, the cultural value of paying effort (*gambaru*) did not apply. However, yoga studios in Hong Kong show the opposite effect. They are a powerful force competing against slimming salons because they successfully veil hard work under a veneer of relaxation, with every detail from the décor and staff, down to the smell and space, all calculated meticulously in order to create a relaxing ambience, making the space seem detached from the bustling world outside. The hardship and effort required inside a yoga class is also not mentioned by the staff, and some of the major studios position themselves as a second home for their members. Furthermore, some of the studios have indeed combined with beauty salons. This seems to be an attempt to make sure that they satisfy the more specific beauty needs of the members instead of losing out to beauty salons.

## **Discipline**

Although the atmosphere in studios is usually relaxing, discipline rests at the core of the social distinction yoga offers. According to yoga texts, yoga is concerned with the discipline of the body and of the mind. Following *ashtanga* yoga<sup>35</sup>—the eight limbs of

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<sup>35</sup> To recap, the eight limbs include *yama* (abstinence: what one should not do), *niyama* (observance: what

yoga—in the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (1990 [1978]: 125), *samadhi*, or spiritual enlightenment, is the ultimate aim of yoga. One needs to adhere to many rules along the yoga path, such as observance, non-violence, meditation, withdrawal from the external senses, and so on in order to reach *samadhi*. Although most of the yoga studios in Hong Kong emphasize the physical alone, they often need to position themselves as adhering to yoga traditions, which usually involve the eight limbs, in order to gain authority. Adherence to the yoga path according to tradition requires much discipline. However, discipline tends to be minimized in the modern-day studio. Even though there is a set of rules and regulations at the studio, they are not always strictly enforced.

Going through the procedures of entering a studio shows how discipline is loosely implemented. Upon arrival at the studio, students are required to present their membership cards to the staff at the reception desk. With a swipe of the card on the machine, all one's personal information is shown, along with a headshot for identification. Then the receptionist gives back the card and hands out another card for access to the studio classroom. Although the rules say that no drinks other than water can be brought in, no mobile phones can be used, and no loud chatting is allowed inside the classroom, these rules are frequently violated. Depending on the studio, students also enter late or leave early, or go for toilet breaks during a one-hour class. Students have much power in resisting the rules in these studios. Most studios shut the door of the classroom once class has started so that late-comers cannot get in. However, individual teachers and studios have different attitudes towards implementing the rules. Some studios do not allow people to go in five minutes after the official starting time of the class; others are more prompt and close the doors exactly at the time when the class is scheduled to start. In one studio, students have come up with a form of resistance to these rules. Late-comers knock on the classroom door

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one should do), *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breath control), *pratyahara* (senses withdrawal), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation), and lastly *samadhi* (contemplation, super conscious state, union with the Divine).



and one of the students inside, even if engaging in a pose or sitting peacefully in the lotus position, will go and open the door for her. This shows that the combined efforts of members can sometimes be powerful in countering the studio's rules, demonstrating how lax the rules are.

### *Discipline as Distinction*

In the more expensive studios, discipline is enacted more closely and latecomers are strictly forbidden. Indeed, the general rule is that the more expensive the studio, the stricter the discipline. At the working-class centers, there is no control set forth over the entering and leaving of students during class. Students' identities are not checked when they enter. They are only asked to put a tick beside their name on the attendance sheet (although even that is voluntary but not necessary). But going to the more upscale studios, rules are exerted more firmly. Classroom doors are closed punctually at the scheduled class time, and no one is allowed to sneak out before the class is finished. This relationship between price and discipline reverses the norm in many places, such as hotels and guesthouses. In Chungking Mansions, a building full of international traders and guesthouses where Gordon Mathews researches, the more expensive a guesthouse, the more relaxed the rules, and this is true in many hotels—the higher the price, the more leeway is given to guests. However, as we will see, discipline as distinction is unique in private clubs in the fitness field, and yoga studios are no exception—discipline is a form of distinction in yoga studios.

In the fitness field, control has priority over pleasure, and instrumental pleasure is seen as more important than spontaneous play (Huizinga 1955). Indeed, some people, who usually present themselves as serious practitioners actively demand and pride themselves on the discipline they follow. The most obvious group is the Bikram<sup>36</sup> followers, where, to

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<sup>36</sup> As illustrated before, Bikram yoga is a patented sequence of yoga postures, done in strictly controlled



quote from my notes,

No water is allowed unless during the water break. There is no toweling off the sweat. The doors are shut after the class starts, and anyone still outside the classroom will not be allowed in. The instructors may even kick people out if they are not happy with their performance. Anyone who carries a phone into the studio would also be kicked out.

Said Vincent<sup>37</sup>, a yoga practitioner who has been doing going to Bikram for a year. “This yoga requires a lot of concentration. If people don’t focus, they’ll fall down.” He has much faith in the rigid system and believes that only by following the sequence strictly would the medical benefits claimed by the yoga style be effective. He has started yoga at Bikram because his girlfriend was doing it and told him about the health benefits it can bring, as he suffered from back pain.

Aside from the Bikram group, other students also demand more discipline in the studio, and I argue that this is also for distinction purposes. A group of students waiting in the lounge for a dance class which will start in 15 minutes complained about other students chatting inside a studio room when the studio door is still open. “They are like a group of 師奶<sup>38</sup> *sináaih*, they are so noisy, turning the place into a market. Yoga is supposed to

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conditions. It is done in a room heated to 40.5 degrees and 40% humidity. During the 90-minute class, the certified instructor gives the exact verbal cues in English at particular time and the sequence is done in the exact manner in every class around the world. It has numerous health claims and there are many steadfast practitioners who insist that the feeling and effects from this style of yoga is unparalleled and cannot be replaced by other forms of yoga.

<sup>37</sup> Although yoga is overwhelmingly promoted as a female activity, male students make up 10% of the class composition. There are less male students in the cheaper studios and the number of male participants in yoga classes increases significantly in the more expensive studios. Looking into the gender dynamics between students in class can provide another dimension to the meaning of yoga in Hong Kong. In yoga classes with regulars, and Vincent being one of them, male students tend to occupy mats on one side of the room and congregate together. They told me they did that on purpose because they did not want to be on a mat close to female students to avoid causing embarrassment. Doing postures facing a female student easily put them in the position of being suspected of checking out the women. It is especially bad when they know the female students as they go to the same classes all the time thus looking at the bodies of fellow female students in class becomes socially unacceptable.

<sup>38</sup> 師奶 *sináaih* is a colloquial and somewhat derogatory term in Hong Kong referring to married women who stay at home and take care of the family. Generally it refers to working class married women who are fat and do not take care of their body and image, who do not care much about their appearance, and who often talk loudly. This image is well-illustrated by local television drama series <<再見亦是老婆>> (Fate of Clairvoyant) produced by TVB and broadcasted in 1994. It told the story of a married woman who stays home and no longer cares about her appearance and has become fat, and no longer attractive. In the drama, she is nicknamed 肥師奶 *fēihsináaih* (肥 means fat). This was presented as a way that her loss of youth and



teach you to keep quiet. They don't seem to be learning it. They should just quiet down.”<sup>39</sup> Such gossip is not uncommon in this particular studio. It is interesting because it is a demand for more discipline to control yoga students, by a group of students who have enrolled in the yoga center, taken yoga classes, yet prefer dancing over yoga. It shows that they have a concept that yoga should be a disciplined subject. At yoga studios, dancing is supposedly secondary and just an additional activity offered on top of yoga to increase the studio's competitive edge. It is sometimes seen by yoga practitioners as an exercise offered to cater to the fitness demand of the customers of the studio, with some fun elements. Increasingly, some studios now have dance classes that are often fully packed and the yoga classes are less popular, and some members are only going to dance classes but not yoga. Devoted yoga practitioners very rarely participate in those classes. However, *sináaih* from the quote above merely describes the act that they are being noisy, that they do not understand the essence of yoga, implying that the *sináaih* are unsophisticated.

As discipline lies at the core of yoga practice according to yoga philosophy, being able to follow the discipline carries much distinction. In the Hong Kong context, *sináaih* seems to be the perfect term for showing a lack of distinction. *Sináaih* carries broad meanings. It describes behavior that is unruly, and it also includes, in its imagination, the fat female body that has “let go”. While the middle class is seen as displaying much self-control over their demeanor and especially over their bodies, the fat body, seen as representing the working class is viewed as lacking in self-governance (Skeggs 2004: 102).

Calling others *sináaih* to draw a line between “us” and “them” is essentially saying that the person herself is not a *sináaih*, as a way to differentiate from others who perhaps are. The analogy of *sináaih* and wet market is more than a coincidence, as I have come

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appearance is the culprit to drive her husband to have an affair with a beautiful young woman and hence leave the family. The soap opera received rave reviews and attracted a large audience. <http://tvcity.tvb.com/drama/fate/index.htm>



across this repeatedly when talking to my informants. Kenneth, a civil servant and an avid yoga practitioner who is a member of two major yoga chains, remarked on another studio, which he tried and did not like. “It’s so noisy there,” he said. “The women chit-chat really loudly before class, and turn the classroom into a wet market”. As someone who sees yoga as his “practice”, who has been practicing for six years, reads extensively on yoga and meditates daily, it makes sense that Kenneth looks for a quiet environment and prefers strict discipline. Yet such act of differentiating one’s own yoga practice from others is also an indirect matter of social distinction. This becomes clear when we consider Cecilia, a divorcee in her mid-50s, who teaches yoga, dance and drawing at a low-cost leisure center. She refers to her previous teacher at the community center as a *sináaih*. “She is not fit, and looks like a *sináaih*. She dresses like a *sináaih*, and talks like a *sináaih*, she is not as good as those at the private studio I’m a member of now,” she said. Note her repeated use of *sináaih*. I asked her to clarify, and she said:

It’s like she’s going to the wet market, if you know what I mean. She is not in proper sports clothes but just a t-shirt and track pants. She talks loudly, just like an ordinary *sináaih*. I didn’t learn much from her. But the teachers at the club I go to now, they wear figure-hugging sleeveless tops, or sometimes bra-tops.

Here, *sináaih* is used to symbolize negative comments concerning the body, and demeanor, as well as the knowledge of yoga that her previous teacher holds. It also has strong social-class implications that one is not from a privileged class. Since she is now no longer learning at the inexpensive community center but at a private club, she is proud and eager to make the differentiation. Although she still teaches at an inexpensive private activities center, she has already gone up slightly in the social ladder and she is ready and proud to demonstrate this to me, mainly through using the term *sináaih*.

We have seen how *sináaih* represents the opposite of discipline. Now we will look at how discipline is useful to create the atmosphere in a yoga studio pursuing distinction.



### *Discipline for Ambience*

Discipline is a way to construct a “yogic ambience” in class. If people were to come in late or leave early, the class experience would be weakened. Upscale studios are careful to enforce the rules strictly in order not to impede such an experience. At the same time, the high cost of these studios can also prevent those *sináaih*, people with little money, lower-class taste, and who do not know how to behave appropriately in particular situations, from joining. By keeping out what they see as undesirable behavior, the members of the club can better enjoy themselves without interference. Thus while purchasing leisure, they are at the same time paying to be disciplined. Discipline and leisure may be oppositions on the surface, but they go hand-in-hand in constructing the yoga experience in high-end studios.

This heavily intertwined relationship between leisure and discipline is reconciled by consumption. It resolves

the tension between restraint and indulgence: the prospect of shopping for a newly fit body is a means to reward discipline with pleasure; the buying of a health club membership, new sports equipment or personal trainer services is represented as a “necessary” indulgence in order to accomplish self-discipline (Maguire 2008: 196).

Yoga studios in Hong Kong, just like American fitness centers, are places where hedonistic consumer culture is linked to ascetic exercise as cause and effect, and function to propel consumption, persuading people to purchase membership, guaranteeing it as the solution to many problems.

### *Membership as a Status Symbol*

Access to yoga studio is a form of distinction, enhanced by the exclusive nature of these studios being limited to members; thus yoga studio membership is part of construction of a self to be presented to others, just like those resort clubs in Casablanca

described by Maroon (2007). “These exclusions function on multiple levels and suggest the complex overlaps and distinctions between class and status as indicators of either the right to, or the negation of, inclusion” (Maroon 2007: 146). Moreover, the choice of being a member of a specific yoga studio, like shopping, can show one’s disposition and taste. It is an enactment of lifestyle (Shields 1992: 16). “Shopping is not merely the acquisition of things: it is the buying of identity” (Clammer 1992: 195). It reflects “decisions about self, taste, images of the body and social distinctions” (ibid.: 195). Indeed, being in the right club is a good way to showcase one’s taste and lifestyle. This situation is not unique to yoga studios in Hong Kong but common for health clubs in the U.S., as Maguire well illustrates,

Just as the body is a status object, the places in which the body is tended, maintained, and improved are also spaces of status. Health club membership is marketed as not only a leisure pursuit and a healthy use of discretionary income; membership is also an investment in your status profile: membership in the “right” club is an indispensable element of the lifestyles of the status-conscious (Maguire 2008: 62).

Yoga studio membership adds to that because the meaning of yoga can bring about more distinction. Yoga studios are well aware of the prestige their membership carries. Indeed, it seems that they see it as such an important form of distinction that they fail to look into more intricate details on how the different attitudes of their members towards yoga can affect the degree of distinction they receive. Just as I have illustrated in the last section, “playing” yoga, the term and idea much promoted by yoga studios in Hong Kong, may be looked down upon by serious yoga practitioners. However, studios may well prefer their members to adopt a more light-hearted attitude towards yoga. On the one hand, most students of yoga in Hong Kong seem to want to exercise, and have some fun, and slim up and gain social distinction (though it may be unconscious) through yoga. Thus that strategy, treating yoga as a form of “play”, can attract a large crowd of students. Members of yoga



studios who adopt such an attitude presumably do not go to classes too often. It is perhaps what the yoga studios desire. It does not seem to be in the interest of yoga studios that their members are devoted yoga practitioners who go to several classes every day. Rather, it is to their economic benefit that they have a large number of members who only go to classes once in a while, which would allow the yoga studio more capacity to recruit new members. While yoga studios care about enrolling people to join the membership so that they would receive the fees, and creates an image to customers that membership itself is a form of social status; practitioners are concerned about their yoga practice and the prestige it may carry.

Choice of studios is a form of status, and thus people are very careful in choosing. When a studio which has an Indian ashram décor opened a new outlet, an all-woman club which is pink in color and heavily lined with mirrors, many members voiced discontent. Winnie is one of them, “I don’t like it there, it is like a gym. Yoga shouldn’t be like that, the studio should be more like an ashram.” She is in her mid-30s, and goes to yoga class every morning before going to work. Another member at the club said, “I don’t need chandeliers where I practice.” This seems to show a serious attitude towards yoga, thus they want the studio to be simple and not extravagant, adhering to the yoga tradition. Regina, who has been to India for yoga, and has much experience in yoga, has stopped going to “Yoga India” once she joined “Yoga Sanctuary”, a “Western” and more expensive studio. The scientific methods and higher fees at the latter may well be a stronger and more significant form of distinction, compared to the Indian-taught studio which does not emphasize precise instructions and scientific explanations on the postures. She said,

At “Yoga Sanctuary”, they have a Western approach to yoga, where they explain things in detail, how each body part should be in the pose. For example in headstand, they tell you that your feet should be flat, like you are standing upside down. But they don’t explain things so clearly at “Yoga India”, which is ok for me, since I know a lot of those things already. But it is difficult for beginners to learn.

She still has her membership at “Yoga India” but is not going there anymore, because she thought she has learnt everything from them and comments that they do not give clear, detailed instructions. Underlying such explanation, she is also opting for a club with higher prestige and recognition in the yoga industry.

## CONCLUSION

Yoga studios reconcile the contradiction between discipline and leisure, acting as perfect sites for conspicuous leisure, where people display their ability to spend idle hours engaging in activities not necessarily translatable into money. Just like the American health clubs, yoga studios,

reconcile the mismatch between cultural connotations of leisure as a time of ease and relaxation, and the hard work of exercise, thus positioning body work as a means of negotiating the conflicting demands made of the individual body: to be a focus of work and leisure; to be disciplined and enjoyed (Maguire 2008: 62).

On the whole, studios put in much effort in creating a relaxing ambience in contrast to the crowded environment and stressful lifestyle of the world outside. In order to create a relaxing ambience, the décor and hygiene are highly important. A spotless environment enhances the feeling of a “sanctuary” to the studio and is more than a practical concern. It is also an effort to give a liminal quality to the yoga experience, to detach people from their daily stress, which partially explains why yoga is so popular in Hong Kong.

On the surface, there seems to be little discipline and there is an emphasis on leisure. Using “play” as the verb to describe yoga is one of the obvious ways to do so. I have found a trend that the more expensive the studio, the more relaxing the environment. Although rules exist, most studios impose them loosely, yet, a closer investigation reveals that the more upscale a studio, the stricter the discipline; as discipline means serious practice, and it



gives distinction. Relaxation is only on the superficial level; deep down, discipline produces true leisure by banning inappropriate behavior and avoiding disturbance in class. *Sináaih* is commonly used to refer to the other people in the studio who do not know how to behave, thus draws the individual's distinction from the rest. Joining the "right" club can add much to one's social status as it is also a form of consumption and identity. People are paying to be disciplined and it is through the regulation that one can gain a more complete yoga experience, and thus garner more prestige.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Practitioners and Teachers: Ethnicity and Respect**

After looking at how yoga studios construct difference and distinction, this chapter turns its attention to people, to see how individuals make sense of yoga. Focus will be put to two major groups of people: teachers and students. Looking at people's attitudes towards yoga and how they interact in the studio setting, this chapter provides insights for finding out the meanings people assign to yoga.

Individuals also have different attitudes towards yoga, which could be reflected from the verbs they used to refer to yoga. There is much interaction between students and teachers and a variety of relationships exist between them. The teachers' ethnicity seems to have an effect on the degree of respect they receive. In this chapter, I probe into the relationship between ethnicity and distinction, and consider the value of ethnicity in Hong Kong's yoga scene today.

#### **Verbs for Describing Degree of Engagement in Yoga**

Even within a single yoga studio, individuals speak of their yoga practice using different terms. Different verbs are used to refer to yoga and these verbs have deep implications towards the attitude yoga participants have for yoga. "Play" is a unique verb in Hong Kong for describing yoga, as we have analyzed last chapter. It is a conscious effort by studios to create a leisurely and playful impression of yoga, thus attracting people to go to yoga studios to have fun. On top of play, I have also encountered two other verbs during the course of my fieldwork, each of them carrying significance going far beyond the word



itself.

### *“Doing Yoga”*

“做瑜珈”<sup>40</sup> *jouhyùhgà* [do yoga], is the most frequently used phrase. It is commonly used in Hong Kong and to a less extent in other places, as there is a stronger tendency to say “practice” outside of Hong Kong. The word “do” itself implies requiring effort and a serious attitude; thus it is rarely used by studio staff in the club. It is by far the most common verb used to describe yoga in Hong Kong, and is used by people who are engaged in yoga as well as outsiders. “Where do you do yoga?” I am sometimes asked by people. Teachers at the “Workers’ Union Center” yoga class also uses it a lot, so do teachers at the private studios. “You have not come to do yoga for a long time, what happened to you?” asked the teacher at one of my fieldsites. It shows an intermediate level of devotion, with a neutral meaning that rests between “play” and “practice”.

### *“Practicing Yoga”*

Practicing yoga is the most serious way to refer to yoga. It almost surrounds yoga with an aura. To practice means “to perform or work at repeatedly so as to become proficient” or “to train by repeated exercises”<sup>41</sup>. This could also be used to refer to kungfu or Taoism on top of sports. Very often, people say “practice” in English but rarely is “practice” / “練” *lihn* said in Cantonese. Unlike other verbs, which are spoken in Cantonese, people who “practice” yoga say this in English. They do it either because it is their mother tongue, or because they insert the English word “practice” in a sentence that was originally in Cantonese. In Hong Kong, only a small proportion of those who participate in yoga say

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<sup>40</sup> “Do” and “做” *jouh* are quite literal and direct translations. “做” *jouh* means “to work; to make; to do”, it connotes paying effort in an activity.

<sup>41</sup> Definition according to Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>.

they “practice” it. They consider themselves “yoga practitioners”, and at times yogis. This verb is mostly used by yoga teachers and students who have been engaged in yoga for an extended period of time and consider it a serious pursuit which goes beyond the body. “I practice every single day. Only when I practice every day would I qualify for teaching,” said the head teacher of a local studio. This shows the central importance of “practice” and how it is often used by people who seek to present an image that they are serious about yoga.

The word is also used as a noun, to describe “yoga practice”. Mandy, whom we have seen at in chapter 3, once wrote an article for the yoga studio she goes to share her yoga experience. She wrote, in English, “before the practice begins, we are invited to chant ‘om’ three times to cleanse our mind and remind of our presence at that very moment. I find peacefulness and calmness during my practice.” Note the repeated use of the word “practice” to refer to yoga as a noun and also as a verb. She is a life member<sup>42</sup> of the yoga studio and has been doing yoga for four years now and reads yoga books every day. Martin, a yoga teacher whom we have seen in chapter 2 and 3, who belongs to a major studio, also refer to yoga as a practice, “the love of self is what helps us understand this beautiful practice of yoga and as we learn to relate to that a little better, there is certainly more beauty all around.” Because of the vast nature of yoga, blurring the line between an exercise and a spiritual system, practice seems to be the only noun that is broad enough to encompass and refer to yoga, according to a majority of the devoted yoga practitioners. At the same time, it connotes a very serious attitude and regularity towards yoga.

When people choose to say “practice”, it can be regarded as a way to demonstrate distinction because it creates an image that they are more serious than other people about

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<sup>42</sup> Membership subscription of fitness chains and yoga studios follow the same model. Life-memberships are offered to members so that if they pay a large sum of premium, they are entitled for the club membership for life, plus a few hundred dollars for administrative fees each year to maintain the membership status. Usually the life-membership cost around HK\$30,000.



yoga. It gives an image that one takes yoga as more than a physical but a philosophical or spiritual pursuit. This is unlike “play” and “do”, which shows a light-hearted attitude and a physical focus. “Practice” is most often heard in Westerner-taught studios and less frequently heard in locally-taught studios, and nonexistent in working-class lessons. Using English in itself is a good indicator of how “practice” is significant for differentiating oneself from others. English has always been a status symbol and a sign that one is well-educated. Thus on top of the meaning of practice, saying it in English in itself carries status implications. More on English as a form of distinction is discussed in chapter 6.

After looking at how the various verbs for describing yoga reflect the different attitudes towards yoga, we will turn to look at how the ethnicity of teachers has an effect on the respect they receive and their interaction with students.

### **Ethnicity, Respect, and Relationships**

In yoga studios, a variety of relationships exist between teachers and students beyond the simple dichotomy of these roles. The relationship can reflect on two things: first, students’ attitudes towards yoga and second, their respect for different teachers. The various terms used for referring to the relationship, e.g. instructor, teacher, master, “star” as opposed to members, students and “fans” are not mutually exclusive but there is much overlapping. The various ways of referring to the relationship tells much about the dynamics, the fluid and multi-faceted relationship, which evokes “a sense of movement from the space of one discourse to another” (Rhodes 2004: 9). The multi-faceted relationship between teachers and students in a yoga studio is similar to what Rhodes discusses about the various relationships between prisoners and guards in maximum security prison although without much of the criminal connotations.

The dichotomy of terms referring to the teaching staff and the students are not often used directly by the two parties to refer to each other in face-to-face situations. Most often, they called each other by first name in English to keep the relationship personal and egalitarian. But when referred to as a third party, labels such as teachers, students, instructors, and members are used. The exception is in the case of master and her student, where students are like devoted disciples, calling the person who teaches them yoga “master”. “Star” and “fans”, invented by some students to describe popular teachers and their devoted students, are used more rarely and the terms are almost never used in direct reference. The only time that is used is by outsiders to comment on the relationship between the two parties.

### *Instructor/Members*

One of the more common sets of terms is “instructor” and “member”. The terms are directly adopted from the fitness industry and imply a strictly consumer/service provider relationship, which is non-hierarchical in nature. This shows much divergence from the yoga tradition, in which students have traditionally learned from a much revered master. This relationship gives a light-hearted touch to the activity of learning yoga. Students may feel they are merely members of the club, a place for fun and leisure, and not feel obliged to be constrained by discipline or to perform well. This goes along with the “playing yoga” attitude that studios want to construct. All of these instructors are called by their English first names to establish a feeling of equality and closeness. Martha, a 25-year-old working in the financial industry, who has been doing yoga for one year at an upscale chain, found it strange that instructors, especially the famous ones, should share shower facilities with the students. It violates the hierarchy she is used to in local schools, where teachers enjoy more privilege and sometimes use different toilet and dining facilities from students. For the



studios, not building a separate changing room for the teachers, in addition to cost benefits, also reduces the superiority of the teachers and creates an egalitarian relationship. Instead of being superior figures, these instructors, who are usually young and beautiful females, act as role models for the members, mostly women in their late twenties to forties. They look up to the instructors in achieving a slim body ideal. Such an egalitarian relationship could make the members feel that the body ideal is accessible through engaging in yoga.

### *“Teacher/Student”*

Beyond the terms instructor/member are the terms “teacher/student”, which show a stronger degree of devotion to yoga and a stronger degree of bonding. The term “teacher” is generally used with some respect from the students’ part, although most of these teachers are still called by their first names. However, in the big studios, those who teach are almost always young teachers, of under forty years of age. This could be seen as an effort to sell the youthfulness and energetic image of yoga studios. The only exception is when the teachers are older locals working in some smaller-scale local studios.

Some students can have fairly close relationship with teachers. In a local-taught studio, regulars sometimes go for meals together after class, and the teacher may join in. However, that is not very common and there are usually only a few students that the teachers can mingle with. On the other hand, bonding between Indian teachers and local students seem to be stronger than that between locals. Mimi, a 19-year-old student studying fashion, who describes herself as a part-time university student and a full-time student at the Indian yoga studio, said, “The teachers are really kind and give much effort in teaching.” She went on to show me a photo of her in an inverted pose: “On the last day of Ganesh’s class, he helped me do the *Vrishchika*<sup>43</sup> pose. I wanted to show him what he has taught me and how much I

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<sup>43</sup> *Vrishchika* means scorpion in English. It is an inversion pose, with starts from the headstand. It is one of

am thankful for his teaching.” Upon that teacher’s departure, she and a group of other members held a party for him in a restaurant. She cried so much that her eyes were swollen the next day. She has been going to the yoga studio every day for class since joining the club a year ago. The relationship between Indian teachers and local students will be further looked into later.

### *“Master/student”*

Beyond the terms “teacher/student”, I have also found a few exceptional cases of the terms “master/student” being used, terms that connote the relationship that traditionally exists in yoga in India, involving much respect and a strong sense of hierarchy. In Hong Kong, I found that the master is always an Indian male, who supposedly has been raised practicing yoga since a very young age and presents a spiritual image of yoga. Rana is one such example. He has set up his own studio, with a team of Indian teachers. Skeptics say “he has named himself master”. “Master” is how he is referred to, by everyone from staff to members of the studio. During one of his classes at the studio, he told the class that he wakes up at 4.30 every morning and practices two hours of meditation. He went on to tell the class that they should not emphasize bodily beauty because it does not last. (However, he himself dresses in tight tops to show his muscles in almost all classes, and in one of the advertisements on the studio’s website, he is bare-chested to show off his muscular figure. He has told me in an interview that his body is a testimony that yoga can do students much good). Having also to manage studios in Thailand and Australia, he usually comes to Hong Kong once every three months, and stays for a week or two each time. When he does come, his classes are usually packed. Sally, who has been doing yoga for three years, described the impact Master Rana has on her. “My master’s smile brightens up my day.” She hugged

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the more difficult postures, usually reserved for more advanced practitioners.



the master after taking his class and had a small private chat with him. They talked close to each other's ears, and kissed each other on the cheek. She looked really touched afterwards.

Another case of "master/student" that I have observed is in a mainly local-taught studio with only a few Indian teachers. Mandy, an avid practitioner considers one of the Indian teachers in the studio a master. He is an Indian man with a long ponytail, and has a beard, and a very dark complexion. On top of his mystical appearance, he is also said to have practiced yoga near the Ganges River area, which is considered by some as a pristine and spiritual place. Mandy, as we have seen in chapter 3 and earlier this chapter, said, "He is a true master. He knows so much about philosophy and has so much energy... He read the article I wrote about my yoga journey and said that I am moving onto the spiritual yoga level. I feel so happy." The aforementioned teacher had to go back to India twice during his one-and-a-half year stay in Hong Kong to "recharge" his energy. He explained that Hong Kong is too crowded and has lost touch with nature; thus he has lost a lot of his energy since coming here. His classes often have an air of seriousness and he chants at the beginning and end of class. However, not everyone buys into his spiritual image as Mandy does. Instead, his image is apparently hurting his popularity among students. The program manager of the studio told me that he has the least students among the four Indian teachers, who are all male, at the studio. She attributes it to the fact that "he is too much like a guru." I was also told that among the four, the most popular one is a tall good-looking young man who often wears figure-hugging *nike* sleeveless tops and jokes with the female students in and out of class. This seems to show that although some people see Indians as masters, and give them much respect, it is not always the case. The spiritual guru image seems not to be the prime reason for most people to go to classes taught by Indians.

Contrary to the master, the “star” is often a good-looking and young teacher, who has many students and is of high rank in the studio. Although some of these teachers are indeed former models or celebrities, I mean something else in this context. They attract many students and their classes are often packed. A member once commented that students are like fans when they go to a famous teacher’s class. She said that the students are going to that particular teacher’s class simply because she is famous, thus they are like fans following an idol. Often, these “fans” stick to a particular teacher and are regulars in the classes. Some informants have also half-jokingly admitted that they are “fans” of the particular teacher they are following. Most large studios, I have found, have at least one teacher like that to attract a loyal following of students.

After looking at the various types of relationship between teachers and students and their implications, let us now look into how exactly these people interact. I have found that a strong joking relationship sometimes exists, especially between male Indian teachers and local female students.

### *Joking Relationships*

Although there is deference for the master-like Indian figures, there is also a close relationship between Indian male teachers and local female students, which has an effect of eliminating the distance between the two. On the row of sofas in the small lounge in one yoga studio, an Indian teacher was eating a cake bought by one of his female students, who has also brought him to Shenzhen to show him around. Miranda told me about how he does not eat eggs because he is a vegan but she keeps buying him the same cake, which contains eggs inside. “It is his favorite cake, it is ok if I don’t tell him about it,” she said. We had this chat, in Cantonese, right in front of the Indian teacher. She and the other female students



chatted excitedly with him, in a mix of Cantonese and English. To an extent, they are chatting with him and about him at the same time. “Aiyo, you don’t know ga la,<sup>44</sup> Anan, you like this cake a lot, right? Very good cake la!” She said this while Anan, the Indian teacher, nodded, munching on his cake. The group of students started talking about how they hosted a party for him for his birthday. When I asked where they went, one of them showed me a disgusted face and told me they went to an Indian restaurant “because the teachers like it. I don’t like those foods, always curry, curry, and curry. It is so boring to eat with them because they wouldn’t eat anything [referring to the fact that many of them are vegetarians],” she said. These women are very much like patrons of these Indian teachers and there does not seem to have very strong respect for the teachers although they are keen in spending time with them.

A marked contrast exists between these two groups in terms of gender, ethnicity, wealth and role: that of teacher and student, service provider and customer, Indian male and Hong Kong Chinese female, and shows their wealth gap. Thus a strong joking relationship, originally used to bond kin members, exists between the teachers and the female students as described by Radcliffe-Brown (1965) is at work to reduce the embarrassment that could have come from such drastic differences between the two and bring them together. Indian teachers often try hard to make jokes in classes, whereas after the class, students tend to dominate in the joking relationship but the purpose is still the same: to pull the involved parties together and minimize social distance caused by unequal relationships or different interests of people.

Stories of Indian male teachers dating their students are not uncommon, although such relationships usually remain underground. Indeed, I have been told such stories by four different people whom I have met in different walks of life who are involved in yoga

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<sup>44</sup> “Ga la” as well as “aiyo” are often used in colloquial Cantonese and English for Hong Kong people.

through different means. I have not witnessed such cases personally but looking at how the two groups treat one another, it is not surprising that such relationships exist. I have also been told that these male Indian teachers have multiple girlfriends, who are often their students. The relationships are kept secret for many reasons; one is that many of these women are married, and so are the teachers at times. Also, studios also do not want to give the impression that their teachers are picking up students, as it brings a negative image to the studio. Thus dating between teachers and students is implicitly proscribed, or at least, not seen on the surface.

For the female students, sleeping with a yoga master she much reveres may be a form of prestige, as they are led to believe that by doing so, it could ascend them in the spiritual path. One informant told me about her friend who was “invited” by a male Indian teacher to bed together, claiming it could increase her energy and escalate her in her spiritual enlightenment. Thus this can put female students in a slightly vulnerable situation to be manipulated by the teachers.

At the same time, this situation is not limited to Indian teachers. I have also heard about Western male teachers having many female “fan” students, and sometimes engaging in ambiguous relationships with their students. Eva, a part-time yoga teacher from England, once described why the male teachers are so attractive to the women. She explained that they are “rugby playing pastors”, with the body of a rugby-player and the gentleness and personality of a pastor, that which is every woman’s dream.

Although different teachers have close relationship with students, the ethnicity of teachers has a significant impact on the social status they receive, as I will discuss in the next section.



## **Yoga, Ethnicity, and Status**

Looking at the historical development of yoga in Hong Kong, we have seen the yoga scene dominated by teachers of different ethnicity throughout the years. From Indians in the 1950s, to local Hong Kong Chinese in the 1960s-1980s, to Westerners in the 1990s, and a hybrid of Indians, Westerners and local Hong Kong Chinese flourishing now. This section discusses the relationship between ethnicity of teachers and status. Do Indian, Western or local teachers get more prestige?

The case of Indian teachers will be examined first. Despite being the first stop in the global tour for the Indian masters to spread yoga to the world, yoga had a very limited appeal in Hong Kong until 2000. The continuing effort of local teachers in the 1960s-1980s to offer economical classes for ordinary Hong Kong people failed to gather a mass pool of students. Only when yoga became vastly popular in the U.S. and in the West in the late 1990s did yoga start to pick up its momentum in Hong Kong. Yoga gradually gained popularity and entered the mainstream, becoming widely available to people after much added glamour and commercialization. In Hong Kong, there are only two studios marketing their “Indianness” by having mainly Indian teaching faculty and with wooden statues with an Indian touch as the décor. Yet, in these studios, yoga classes heavily laden with spiritual elements such as meditation are less popular than the physical classes. Thus Indian style yoga is not necessarily popular because of the spiritual associations. This matches the earlier discussion that Indian teachers with a strong spiritual image are not necessarily more popular.

Ethnicity has deep implications in the seeming contradiction between body and spirituality. Indians are typically assumed to be spiritual while Westerners may be considered as more concerned with the physical. When the “Evolution Asia Yoga Conference 2007” took place in Hong Kong, the majority of the teachers who taught

physical yoga were Westerners and those who taught yoga philosophies were Indians. The same is found in Hong Kong studios, where there is a tendency for Indian teachers to teach all the meditation and breathing classes. The common explanation is that Indians have been practicing meditation for a long time and they have more experience in it, making them more qualified. Yet by the same token, they should also have more experience teaching physical classes, and therefore the explanation does not seem valid.

Based on the yoga scriptures, traditional spiritual yoga is higher than physical yoga, thus Indians, who are considered to be better at spiritual yoga, should gain more respect. However, in Hong Kong where yoga is taken more or less as a fitness fad, and the body mostly often the prime motivation behind people's doing yoga, this is not always the case. It seems that the Western style of yoga, often with a tint of spiritual element despite being very physical, may have an edge in popularity over the Indian style, as we will see in the coming section. Before going into that, we will first have a good understanding of the yoga traditions in Hong Kong.

### *Yoga Traditions in Hong Kong*

Today, putting aside the technicalities of the division between different styles of yoga, there are four major "traditions" of yoga offered in Hong Kong. Instead of making division by the more traditional styles of yoga, such as ashtanga, hatha, Iyengar, and Mysore, various new styles of yoga has evolved such as Anusara, vinyasa, power, hot, Bikram, flow, core, and yin yang. Either they are slightly altered forms of the more traditional yoga types with a different name, or a style that has been developed to satisfy customers' needs. These styles coexist with the traditional ones and the list encompasses most of the names of yoga classes in Hong Kong. These yoga styles all carry a slightly different image but I suggest that more than the style, it is the traditions, including its history in Hong Kong and whom it



is taught by, which carries different images punctuated by intricate subtle differences.

I categorize the yoga traditions in Hong Kong into four separate groups: traditional yoga, Western yoga taught by Westerners, Western yoga taught by locals, and Indian yoga. The Indian style brought in by Indian masters five decades ago, short of philosophy, became localized and taught by locals, who are often middle-aged men and women; this is considered by locals as the traditional style of yoga. It is usually slow but physical, with no spirituality attached. The Western style of yoga, taught by Westerners, is physically strenuous, and usually with a tint of spirituality; this may be seen as the “Western” or “new style” of yoga. This style of yoga is also taught by a generation of local teachers, but it usually differs from the tradition taught by Westerners in that they usually do not mention any spirituality. Lastly, there is “Indian yoga”, taught by what some Indian teachers claimed to be authentic Indian yoga. A closer investigation often shows that this style may not adhere to the supposedly traditional style inherited from the Indian masters who taught in Hong Kong fifty years ago. These four traditions differ in prestige. In most of the big commercial studios, the new/Western tradition of yoga is offered, or sometimes the Indian style if they have Indian teachers. Traditional-style yoga is shunned by these studios while Western-style taught by Western teachers carries much prestige. However, regardless of the style, most classes are more or less physical aside from the meditation class which appears once or twice a week in the schedule of most large, mainstream studios in Hong Kong. Aside from those few classes, teachers of all ethnicities give classes with a similar degree of physicality.

### *Indian Authentic Yoga?*

Unlike many cities in the West, Hong Kong has a large number of Indian teachers. Whether students prefer Indian teachers is complicated and often has much to do with the

association with ethnicity. But it is doubtful whether the teachers really represent authentic Indian yoga. This is complicated enough as it is, without discussing whether “authentic yoga” exists at all. Indians can have authority just by standing there, by being “Indian”. Hong Kong students tend to assume that Indians are good at yoga regardless of what they actually do in classes. Many fans of Indian teachers consider the teachers as teaching more authentic yoga and cherish the fact that they have long experience in yoga, others admire them for being able to do the full yoga poses beautifully. This is Orientalism although Hong Kong is not a colonial power, and is located further East than India, instead of being in the West, two elements which was originally present when discussing Orientalism (Said 2003 [1978]).

Indian teachers are sometimes inclined to show off their history of winning numerous yoga championships in India and having been raised in a yoga family. Master Rana once introduced a new teacher to the students in class as follows, “He is from Rishikesh, yoga capital of the world. He has been doing yoga since he was five and has won numerous yoga championships. He is like a rubber man.” The new teacher went on to do some extremely challenging poses, twisting his body like a pretzel while smiling proudly to the class. In general, Indian teachers are more likely to introduce and demonstrate very difficult poses to students to showcase their yoga ability. Master Rana, in a few of his classes that I have attended, also makes full use of his body, through showing the full command he has over it and displaying his physique at the same time. He often demonstrates a breathing technique involving the whole abdominal area. To do that, he would fold up his figure-hugging sleeveless t-shirt to his chest area. He also often teaches and demonstrates extremely difficult poses. Some teachers have told me that some of their students are not really doing yoga when they are engaging in extremely difficult poses, but are showing off. This comment may also apply to this master, who relies much on his body to gain respect.



Having taught here briefly in the 1950s, Indian teachers did not come back to Hong Kong until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Now there are many Indian teachers in Hong Kong, with at least one in almost all big studios. There are two big studios which use Indian teachers as the selling point and claim to offer “authentic Indian yoga”. However, quite a few Indian teachers in Hong Kong are teaching new styles that they have invented, sometimes combined with dance or martial arts to suit students/customers. Often, these teachers love to portray the image that everyone in India practices yoga and that Indians are spiritual people, creating and encouraging a certain ethnic imagining of Indians. One time, over an interview, Rana, told me that Indians know how to live, because they are in touch with nature; but Hong Kong people are too busy, have lost their culture, and do not know how to lead a good lifestyle. However, discussion with several Indians living in Hong Kong, added to Alter (2004)’s analysis, shows that it is not true that Indians are all adept at yoga. This is confirmed by Sravaniya de Pecoraro, one of the earliest Western teachers in Hong Kong. “An Indian body is no guarantee of superior knowledge of yoga. It seems they are more interested in cricket, tennis and computer technology than yoga...It was in the dustbin along with the rickshaw until the Western teachers brought it back,” she said. A senior Indian teacher admits this and put the matter quite plainly,

Indians have a long history in yoga. We grew up in an environment that could let us know more about it. But we are not necessarily better yoga teachers. This (referring to the Indian “authentic yoga” slogan) is just about marketing and advertising to attract more students. We are just better yoga products.

This is a perfect illustration of Abner Cohen’s discussion of ethnicity as “essentially a political phenomenon, as traditional customs are used as idioms, and as mechanisms for political alignment” (Cohen 1974), although the politics here are more for attracting students. The Indian teacher who made the above statement seems well aware of this. Assuming yoga as a cultural practice, as the primordial quality of Indians, a custom that Indians are born with, is using Indian ethnicity to claim the authenticity of yoga. Thus

ethnicity is a tool for achieving specific commercial aims.

### *Scandals*

Indian ethnicity may be a card these teachers play to gain prestige, but it is not always confined by their actors. I have been told by different people of scandals including Indian teachers inappropriately touching female students. A long-term Western teacher in Hong Kong, Serena, knows of cases where an Indian teacher molested his students until he was asked to leave the studio. She also knew an Indian teaching in Hong Kong who worked as a martial artist in another city in Asia but learned yoga in a few weeks so he could head a large studio where his friend worked. “There is a whole underground behind the façade of enlightenment and peace, including scams and sexual molestation,” Serena said. Indeed, I have also had such an experience myself during my research. During a class, as I was doing a forward bending pose while standing, the male teacher came to adjust me into a more advanced pose, so that I could stretch more. He used the towel I brought to the studio and had me hold myself tighter with the help of the towel. I could hardly stay in the pose and felt if I moved at all, I would roll over. To put me into the pose, he stood behind me, being unnecessarily close that I could feel his body heat at the back of my legs and my bottom. I wanted to move and get loose from the pose, but I could not as I was tightly bound. Therefore I could only stay still until he left and “released” me from the pose, after what felt like the longest count of ten.

Teachers’ adjusting students is a commonplace in yoga classes in Hong Kong. As some informants who have extensive yoga experience abroad have told me, yoga in Hong Kong is different from that in London and New York because teachers in Hong Kong are more likely to adjust the poses of students in class, which most often involves physical contact. This is often much welcomed because students feel that they are being taken care



of and given much attention. Thus the above incident may not be seen as suspicious by other students in the class. Also, most of them had their heads turned upside down in the forward bend so they would not have been able to look around freely. Also, the teacher was careful not to stand so close that he was actually touching me, so that it could leave room for interpreting whether or not this really was a form of sexual harassment. The teacher can be very discreet in this way, and this can perhaps partially explain why such cases are rarely noticed or reported by others. I told the membership consultant after the class about the incident, telling her that the teacher was standing very close, or too close to me when adjusting the pose; she said she would let the company know, but they have not given me a reply.

The next time I was in his class, when the teacher tried to adjust me in my pose, I stared at him angrily and said out loud that I did not need him to help. But there are many other students, who often playfully plead with him not to make them go into a more difficult pose, “No! No! No!” In this sense my reaction did not really stand out from the others’ half-joking remarks. While some students tell the teacher not to adjust their poses, some other students who are being adjusted by him make moaning noises “Argh!!!!” Thinking back, I recalled the first time I talked to him after class; he was looking into my eyes, telling me how women are so beautiful when they do yoga. He told me how they “radiate a vibe” that is really special and attractive. In hindsight, I understand what he was hinting at. Later, I spoke to a yoga practitioner from another studio. Knowing that I go to this particular studio, she commented on the quality of their teachers and mentioned this teacher particularly, saying how he is infamous for harassing students. This teacher has a group of steadfast fans, usually married women in their thirties and forties, who go to his classes regularly. Although he left the studio a few months later, it did not seem to be related to this behavior. Instead, another studio, offering him better terms, recruited him.

From what I have heard, he has since fared quite well in that new studio and has gathered a big crowd of students.

According to Serena, these cases tend to go unreported because there are no regulations or a central authority dealing with yoga. Although such cases are not often reported, word does get around and this discredits Indians in their spiritual claims, thus tarnishing their image. This kind of case seem most frequent among Indian teachers. However, recently there is also a Hong Kong Chinese male teacher being tried for sexual assault, for inappropriately touching the students during and after the yoga class, telling students he would perform acts to make them better at yoga (*Apple Daily* June 5, 2008). This shows that such scandal is not limited to Indian teachers.

#### *Westerner as Authority?*

Westerners are behind the major studios in Hong Kong; they finance and manage the big yoga centers and events. At the same time, these big studios employ teachers teaching in the Western style, reinforcing what is defined as yoga authority. Most of these teachers have come from North America and a few of them came from Western Europe. Some of them come to Hong Kong purposely to teach yoga, others have been living here for a number of years and turned from students to teachers of yoga. These Western teachers are often fluent in Sanskrit vocabularies of yoga postures and have much knowledge of yoga philosophy. They often teach in a way that can draw on anatomical knowledge and scientific explanations, giving them much credibility. Despite teaching physically demanding yoga, they often add in spiritual elements in their classes. All of these together garner them much recognition in the yoga industry in Hong Kong.



### *Local Teachers*

Local teachers face a bigger challenge to gain prestige than Indian or Western teachers. Usually young females, these teachers often need to have a perfectly slim body, dress in beautiful, figure-hugging yoga clothes, and be fluent with the names of yoga postures in English in order to teach in the major studios. Almost all of those who teach in these studios have learned the modern/Western style of yoga. They teach in Cantonese, and mix in English occasionally, for the name of the postures such as “downward-facing dog”, “warrior one”, and at times when giving cues like “breathe in, breathe out”. In comparison, the prestige for local teachers who teach in the traditional style is lower. These teachers often teach purely in Cantonese, even for name of the postures. Regina, who studied yoga long ago from a local male teacher (teaching in traditional style), as we have seen earlier in this chapter, commented that the yoga she learned at that time was at quite a low standard. She has since moved to private studios: first a studio with Indian teachers, and then to a more expensive one with Western teachers.

Today, young female teachers have become the norm in big studios. While the “newer” or “Western” style of yoga is taught in big commercial studios, teachers who teach in the traditional style remain on the periphery, in small dingy studios in the outskirts of the city or in community centers. Indian, Western and local Hong Kong Chinese teachers often offer different styles of yoga, and teach in slightly different ways, but it is not always the case. The difference in style and quality of their teaching affects their status, but at the same time, the ethnicity of the teacher also plays an important role. Although some local “star” teachers may enjoy more status than some Indian or Western teachers, they are only the few exceptional cases. I argue that ethnicity has a major effect on the difference in status these teachers enjoy.

Teachers of different ethnicity can teach different styles of yoga, and this can have

significant effects on how much distinction they gain from teaching. Indians in Hong Kong teach a more aerobic style of yoga, usually counting to ten for each pose, indicating how long students have to stay in the pose. I have found that there is little attention to the detail of how to place each part of the body in the pose, which matches the observation of Andrea Ferretti, a writer for the American version of *Yoga Journal*, the top yoga publication in the U.S. (2008: 114). Western studios are usually more upscale, with the teaching style stressing a scientific approach to yoga, where attention is paid to detail and explanations are given for how each body part should be placed in each pose. The clarity required in giving detailed instructions requires much training and knowledge of the pose, as well as teaching techniques, which, if we put in Bourdieu's terms, is a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984).

### **Ethnicity and Social Class**

I have singled out ethnicity to study its effect on the prestige of teachers; but there is actually an indivisible link between social class and ethnicity. As Sherry Ortner writes, considering the situation in the U.S., "there is no class in America that is not always racialized or ethnicized, or to turn the point around, racial and ethnic categories are always already class categories" (Ortner 2006: 73)... "if to be Jewish is to be, in essence, middle class (whether one is "in reality" or not), then to be (to take the most obvious case) African American is to be seen or felt to be, in essence—and whether one is in reality or not—lower class" (ibid.: 77). In discussing the ethnicity of yoga teachers, we also need to put into account the class image of Westerners and Indians to better map out ethnicity's effects.

Westerners have always occupied elite positions in Hong Kong society, just as in other British colonies, and in the majority of the places in the world. On the other hand, although Hong Kong has long had an Indian presence because of colonial ties with Great Britain,



Indians still carry a tint of mysticism and exoticism, especially when issues related to yoga are considered. In the local media, Indians have little presence, and people know them either as super-rich business moguls, or those working as manual laborers such as security guards. Thus the class association of Indians is mixed and ambiguous.

### *Ethnicity and Social Status*

On top of the connection between class and ethnicity, the choice of a yoga studio, or a particular teacher is also a matter of “taste” and involves “an imagined hierarchy” of good or bad, quite like the discussion of alcohol consumption in Hong Kong (Ma 2001:118). Ma (2001) stated that the national origin of alcohol can determine how people interpret it. In discussing beer, he explained that Chinese beer is seen as being at the bottom of the cultural hierarchy, because of its place of production. Meanwhile, local beer is seen as in the middle, whereas North American and European brands rest at the top of the imaginary middle class and it promotes middle-class ideologies such as “freedom, individualism, fine-grained enjoyment” (ibid.: 124). This hierarchy resonates with the ladder of ethnicity of yoga teachers in Hong Kong. The so-called traditional yoga taught by local middle-aged men is like Chinese or local beer, with an old-fashioned image, receiving little prestige. Yoga taught by young locals is like local beer, or Western beer produced in Asia. Meanwhile yoga taught by Westerners and Indians has the effect like that of *Heinenken*, a Dutch beer, produced in the Netherlands, with more prestige due to the brand’s origin and the place it was produced, having a price slightly higher than yoga taught by others. Being explicitly Western/foreign, it attracts people of largely middle-class background and those who are eager to buy into that image. It has much prestige and sits at the top of the class imagination. The detailed status difference between Indian and Western teachers will be illustrated later in the chapter.

An analysis into the studio décor further illustrates that Indian ethnicity is symbolic but does not carry much practical meaning. Aside from the two studios employing mainly Indian teachers, few of the other studios have an ethnic feel to their interior. Even for the Indian studio, ethnicity does not seem to mean much but is used as a ploy or a tool. The studio recently organized a “Japanese party” for its students, and Japanese-style decoration was put up inside the originally Indian-style studio. This seems to be saying that ethnicity does not matter anymore but is just a way to attract customers. There are other studios in Hong Kong which resemble a Japanese spa resort or a Thai temple more than an Indian ashram. Yoga seems to have become a hybrid of exotic elements, with belly dance, “Indian dance,” Bollywood dance and Thai massage increasingly being offered in different yoga studios. Indianness is no longer the only exoticism to be played with.

Beyond ethnicity, I have found other factors which are important for gathering prestige for yoga teachers, and language is one of them, as I will now discuss.

### *Language*

Having seen that Indian ethnicity in itself may not be enough of a defining characteristic for the success of these teachers, I turn to other features to better understand their degree of popularity. One difference between Indian and Western teachers, and local teachers, is the medium of instruction. Like Western teachers, Indian teachers also conduct classes in English. English has always been the language of the elite class in Hong Kong due to colonial rule but not what the “average Chinese use spontaneously as a means of communication” (Lau 1997: 111). We have seen earlier that referring to yoga as a “practice”, and claiming that one “practices yoga” (most often said in English), is a form of distinction. Beyond this, it could be a form of prestige to have class in English, as it has implications concerning the education level of the students in these classes. The impression



is that these classes are limited to those with good English ability, and thus those who are more educated.

However, it is important to be cautious about English and its meanings. Although one may think that the medium of instruction may determine the group of students that can go into a class, it is not always the case. At the Indian studio, I have met quite a few people who do not speak English but told me that they think it is fine to go into a class taught in English by Indians. They say it is enough as they understand simple cues like “left leg,” “right arm,” “inhale,” “exhale,” “relax.” They find it adequate just to follow what the teacher demonstrates, and look at others when they do not know what the teacher is talking about. This may be seen as an extreme form of preference towards Indians, and could at the same time be interpreted as the embrace of status.

On the other hand, local teachers in large studios, despite conducting the class in Cantonese, often adopt English for the name of the postures, and sometimes even the Sanskrit name of the posture used. These teachers’ English ability seems to be directly related to their popularity, from what I have observed in the studios. The better they speak English and use it in class, the more students they have. For example teachers often say “downward dog,” “triangle pose,” “warrior one,” “bridge pose” and “corpse pose”, to name a few poses. However, it is more than practical needs that lead them to do this. They could easily enough give the names in Cantonese, as most students in the class are Chinese and so is the teacher. Thus I argue that local teachers’ use of English, is less than a practical need but a way to exhibit their cultural capital; they are trying to construct a middle class and international image, with English as the currency.

However, some teachers go further than using English terms to refer to the yoga postures. They adopt Sanskrit terms for the postures, which is the original language in which yoga postures were named. This is how the most prestige is gained through language

use. Sanskrit terms are very often used by Western teachers, and rarely by Indian and local teachers. Meanwhile, at the “Workers’ Unions Center”, the laymen leisure club, all the posture names, along with the class, are given in Cantonese. There is a language hierarchy within yoga classes, with Cantonese at the bottom, and then accented English, then English, and then Sanskrit at the top. The use of Sanskrit as distinction will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 6.

By the same token, I argue that the fact that some students explain that they do not want to go to classes taught by Indians because they cannot understand the teachers’ heavily accented English is more than a practical concern. It is also a matter of class and distinction, as Indian-accented English is not highly respected.

From talking to people in the yoga studios, I have found that although they assume Indian teachers know yoga well, most Hong Kong people do not care about the Indian origin of yoga. Instead, many of them buy into the “Western” association of yoga. They often know about the Indian roots of yoga but they do not necessarily think that Indians are better at teaching it. Classen’s analysis of cross-cultural consumption suggests that products sold in non-Western countries are marketed with a Western image to sell well (Classen 1996: 51). Instead of using exotic Sanskrit names or terms that would suggest a strong ethnic/Indian association, large yoga centers all have names in English which sometimes do not make much grammatical sense, including “Myoga”. Other studios have names like “Planet Yoga”, “Pure Yoga”, “Living Yoga”, “Yoga Limbs”, “Yoga Central”, “Yoga Place”. Of the many studio names studied, one studio “Yogasana” has the name most hinting at its Indianness because “*asana*” means posture in Sanskrit. However, this center is led by a French man and there is no Indian teacher there. According to Classen (1996: 51), in Argentina, local products are sometimes given English, or pseudo-English names to give an American association, and thus give prestige to the items. I would argue the same for the



names of yoga studios in Hong Kong, that the name is a part of the construction of yoga as a Western pursuit, which is significant in creating distinction—yet the names in themselves do not mean much.

### **Beyond Ethnicity? Internationalism**

Other than Westerners, Indians and locals, there are many ABCs<sup>45</sup>, and Chinese who speak fluent English teaching at the more upscale studios. Classes in the most expensive studios are mainly conducted in English by Western teachers, Indians, and Chinese born or raised overseas. Even if both the teacher and the students are Chinese, the teacher would teach bilingually. This points to a new international image which goes beyond ethnicity, and is very much a form of status. As we have discussed before, English is as much a tool for communication as it is a status marker. We have earlier seen that English is not much used in the daily conversation of ordinary locals but reserved for the elites. English seems to bridge these people to the rest of the world and gives them an international image and standing. This internationalism is what the middle class aspires to, and contributes to their status in Hong Kong, the city which prides itself as being Asia's World City.

Introducing local Hong Kong Chinese teachers into the discussion shows that it may not solely be a matter of ethnicity that affects the popularity and status of a teacher. Local teachers who speak good English and teach in the Western style gain much prestige, and often give classes in the major studios, whereas those teaching in the traditional style remain in the marginal and dingy studios scattered around the city. This shows that ethnicity may not be at the core of what yoga consumers aspire to but rather internationalism, underpinned by their English language ability. Instead of ethnicity, what yoga practitioners seek may be the image of modernity and internationalism underlying

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<sup>45</sup> ABC refers to American-born Chinese, but here I including all Chinese raised in Western countries.

foreign teachers, and also local teachers with excellent English. Internationalism is, to a large extent, what gives ethnicity its status value. This is reminiscent of what is described of women in Cairo and Casablanca by Ossman. These women want to follow the hairstyle and slim bodies in Paris, to obtain a “modern” and international body (Ossman 2002). Their desire to embrace modernity through grooming is like yoga students engaging in yoga, and preferring to be taught by teachers who speak English, representing an international/global image. In both cases, the body is used as a medium to make this possible.

## CONCLUSION

The various verbs used to describe yoga indicate people’s attitudes. “Practice” is used as a way to show that one is serious about yoga and as a way to gain distinction. The different terms of reference for the teacher and student reveal the dynamics and fluidity of the relationship underlying the simple dichotomy, indicating that there are many possibilities for different relationships. To keep a close relationship between male Indian teachers and female local students, joking relationships may be used. Looking at the various yoga traditions in Hong Kong, I have found that Western teachers have the most prestige, followed by Indian teachers and local teachers who teach in the Western style; local teachers following the traditional path have least prestige. Indian teachers have a strong ethnic identity which gives an impression that they are good yoga teachers although this is not always true. Indian ethnicity is increasingly just a tool, amongst many, to attract customers to yoga. However, it is not particularly successful and sometimes a hybrid of exoticism exists. Different ethnic elements which may have no linkage with yoga have evolved with the development of the yoga industry. In the end, ethnicity alone no longer seems to be the only source of prestige. In my analysis of the medium of instruction in the more upscale studios, which is usually in English regardless of the ethnicity of the teacher



and students in the class, I argue that it is the international image underlying ethnicity, which also explains popularity of the Westerners and Indians in this case, that is most essentially tied to underlying status, instead of ethnicity in itself.

## Chapter 5

### Yoga and the Fetishism of the Body

The ideal body image in Hong Kong is particularly tilted towards the stick-like figure. In the media, we see specialized and derogatory terms exist to describe deviations from the ideal, e.g. 甲組腳 *gaapjóugeuk* (premier-league legs, referring to the muscular legs of professional footballers), 豪華臀 *hòuhwàhtyùhn* (luxurious behind), 車胎腰 *chètòiyiù* (tire waist), 拜拜肉 *baaibaaiyuhk* (bye bye flesh, referring to the excessive fat on the triceps which waves itself during a goodbye gesture), 豬腩肉 *gyùnáahmyuhk* (pork belly, referring to the excessive fat at the abdominal area), 麒麟臂 *kèihlèuhnbei* (dragon-like arms, describing chunky arms). These terms often appear in magazines and entertainment news describing celebrities, and are picked up by the general public to degrade women. These indicators show how much the female body is being scrutinized in the media and shape the role of yoga in society.

In our contemporary world, the means of yoga—the body—seems to have become an end in itself as people who do yoga often associate it with slimming and as a body-beautifying technique. This points to an interesting discrepancy between classical yoga and yoga today. According to yoga philosophy, the ultimate aim of yoga is spiritual enlightenment. However, yoga in Hong Kong is predominantly sold as a physical exercise for slimming and relaxation, having rid itself of its original meanings. Although yoga philosophy states that controlling the body through physical yoga is one of the ways to achieve spiritual enlightenment, in Hong Kong, an apparent contradiction exists between body and spirituality, as the body has become the prime focus, with slimming and



exercising being predominantly stated as the reason for doing yoga, and spirituality largely ignored. Drawing from Freud, Marx, and definition from the dictionary, I consider fetishism as taking a part of something as its whole. Thus in yoga, I argue that the fetishism exists mainly on two levels. First, yoga has become commodified, as people have to pay for it, which fits into Marx's concept of commodity fetishism. At the same time, yoga encourages fetishism of the body, encouraging people to focus on their body and manifesting the slim body ideal in Hong Kong. When I say fetishism, I do not mean it as a negative comment or criticism. For fetishism of the body, I simply mean that people are taking a part—the body—for the person as a whole.

In Hong Kong, when women go to yoga studios, they are often looking to slim down and to achieve a slender, female body. Although they consider yoga an exercise, the desired body from yoga is not muscular but free of muscles. While many of them quote health reasons as a motivation, almost all of them are also looking to shield a few pounds. This relates closely to the marketing of yoga, which represents and molds people's perception of yoga at the same time. The following are a few examples.



Advertising leaflets emphasizing the slimming effects of yoga. The one on the left promotes hot yoga with a very sexual image. The yoga studio is the subsidiary of a beauty salon, which also owns a fitness center. The model on the leaflet on the right is Margaret Chung, a former actress, who has become the “principal” of a yoga studio, opened by a slimming salon. Hence she teaches there and is also the spokesperson for that studio. The advertisement says that for \$98, one can get a yoga class, nutritional advice and a lymph detox treatment.





Another two billboard advertisement with heavily sexualized images of yoga. Note that both have cheap prices on the billboards: \$100 per month in the ad on the left and \$78 for three classes for the billboard on the right. This is an interesting correlation, where the price is linked to the degree of sexuality: the lower the price, the more explicitly sexuality is played up to attract customers. The more expensive the studio, the more implicitly sex is portrayed. However, it is important to note that it is only the initial promotion price to attract customers; the “real” charge is much higher. The woman in white on the left hand side is a top model in Hong Kong.



More sleek and beautiful images of yoga on billboards and newspapers, promoting a middle class and professional image. The woman on the advertisement on the right is a former model/actress, Almen Wong, who is now a teacher and spokesperson of the upscale yoga studio.



### Marketing and Advertising of Yoga and the Ideal Female Body

Walking down the streets of Hong Kong, it is not difficult to spot yoga studio billboards. Although not always explicitly spelled out, the slimming ideology surrounding



yoga is obvious. Very often yoga studio ads are similar to those of slimming salons. Both show slim young women wearing skimpy clothing in alluring poses. The major difference is that the model in the yoga ad is wearing yoga clothes and is in a yoga posture. Advertisements of yoga studios demonstrate a similar body ideal to that of slimming salons. Slogans of yoga studios such as “come join and experience the slimming effects at ‘Feel Yoga!’” and “‘Yoga Sanctuary’ gets rid of water retention” are commonplace.

Local media coverage of yoga often is concerned with how it can shape or enhance a particular part of the body, or the body as a whole. At the same time, the slimming effects mentioned also come with a sexy image. Studio membership salespeople often highlight such bodily benefits to attract customers. Some of the ads can be quite provocative, with the model sweaty and in a provocative yoga posture. At the same time, the fact that models often discuss the benefits of yoga in the media, especially its inevitable slimming effects, gives the impression that yoga is being practiced by celebrities. In Hong Kong, just as in the U.S. and Japan, a few models and former actresses have left the entertainment business and became famous yoga teachers, with Almen Wong and Margaret Chung the best known. They often appear in advertisements and newspaper columns to promote yoga at the studio they belong to. It is not surprising that yoga should carry a middle-class image, as it is practiced by celebrities, with popular TV series like *Healing Hands* (妙手仁心) showing professionals such as doctors and lawyers doing yoga. At the same time, yoga is presented as a relaxing leisure activity, carrying a touch of sleekness and cosmopolitanism, which fits into the middle-class image.

Usually the more expensive the studio, the less its marketing is suggestive of the body and slimming effects. However, it is still present but is only represented in a slightly less explicit manner. This slim female body ideology was not created by yoga, but Hong Kong has a long tradition of favoring such a body shape. This ideal is hardly surprising, as Hong



Kong is a rich society, where the lifestyle is sedentary and food is easy to come by. On the contrary, fat bodies are appreciated in places where food is scarce (Popenoe 2005: 17). In Hong Kong, the body ideal favored is particularly towards the extremely slender, compared to the rest of the world<sup>46</sup>. This body ideal is perhaps driven by commercial reasons. Companies and advertising lure people to buy into the logic that they are not perfect and need services and products to make them more attractive; this generates financial gain. Such an unobtainable ideal creates lucrative profits for the beauty and fitness industries as people are constantly trying to achieve that ideal through various means.

### **Yoga and the Slim Body Ideal in Hong Kong**

Slimming advertisements all over the city promise short-term gratification. They show stick-thin celebrities and ordinary people showing off their bodies after undergoing slimming treatment. Advertising slogans such as “introducing the 2007 fat exploding technology!”, “guaranteed inch loss and weight loss, or else full refund will be given!” “Lose 20 lbs in just six weeks!” are common. Instead of losing out to the short-term and guaranteed gratification in beauty salons like the fitness clubs in Japan where consumers prefer going to beauty salons for slimming treatments over attending classes in gyms, as we earlier saw in Spielvogel’s work (2003: 75), some yoga studios in Hong Kong cooperate and integrate with beauty salons to provide all-in-one service for customers. Beauty salons have opened yoga studios; there are also yoga studios offering in-house beauty treatments

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<sup>46</sup> The very thin body is being seen as the norm and the beauty ideal in Hong Kong. Although the slim female body is much sought after around the world, the body ideal in Hong Kong is especially towards the slender and there is a narrow tolerance towards different body figures. Not only may white expatriates find it a problem to fit into the norm, Asians brought up or studying abroad coming to Hong Kong have often complained about how difficult it is to find clothes that fit. I have met an American Chinese who wear a size 28 for pants in the U.S. failing to find jeans in her size in Hong Kong, and another friend of mine studying in the Netherlands who was born in Hong Kong told me how she is seen as having a normal body size there but is referred to as “fat woman” in Hong Kong. This body ideal gives rise to many slimming salons, and the slimming hype surrounding yoga.



such as nail treatments, slimming machines, massages and spas. One of these studios even has an in-house beauty salon that offers cosmetic surgery.

In Japan, fashion magazines, beauty salons and fitness clubs all contribute to the “creation and projection of normalizing and highly gendered messages about body image, weight, fashion, and femininity” (Spielvogel 2003: 7). In Hong Kong, yoga studios should be added to that list. With sport displaying publicly “the legitimate body” (Brownell 1995: 28); yoga advertisements to an extent reflect the beauty ideal in Hong Kong. Although yoga is not a sport, many people refer to it as an exercise, and this view has a degree of validity in yoga.

### *Different Slimming Rhetorics*

As a refined/upscale slimming business, the choice of words used to define bodily fatness and the vocabulary describing body slimming has become very sophisticated. “Fat” is used less compared to “weight” or “water retention” when referring to slimming. In one of my fieldsites, I overheard a salesperson discussing the different kinds of bodily imperfections:

There are two types: muscular bulkiness and water bulkiness. In order to reduce muscular bulkiness, you need to do more stretching, and that is why you should do yoga. To reduce water retention, which is actually water but not fat, cardio training like dancing and hot yoga are necessary. And you are offered all of these here!

A member once told me, “I had a lot of water retention, but after I joined the center, I have lost many pounds.” These examples shows a strong tendency for people, especially the sales representatives, to refrain from using the word fat but refer to it as “water retention” or “muscular bulkiness” instead. “Fat” has taken on very negative connotations in this society, where the slim body has long been upheld as the ideal. This is complemented with

an elaborate list of vocabularies that are alternatives to slimming: fat reduction, weight loss, keeping fit, and newer terms such as body trimming (修身) and body sculpting (塑身). These terms, largely borrowed from the beauty industry, are carefully chosen by the sales representatives, or their supervisors. The variety of words shows the degree of sophistication that lies within slimming, although these terms are not used as readily and with as much sophistication in the yoga studios as in beauty salons.

Instead of focusing on the holistic practice, specific functions of yoga are emphasized to sell memberships in yoga studios. Upon the first visit, the customer is asked to fill in a form providing personal information and discussing one's health condition. In one of the studios, there is a form with 16 boxes stating the functions of yoga and the customer is asked to tick which of those she/he would like to achieve; "weight loss \_\_\_\_ lbs/ improved sexual energy/ to feel younger/ to feel more relaxed ...". Yoga is sold very much like a beauty treatment. Similar to visits to beauty salons, membership consultants of yoga studios ask what the potential customer wants to achieve from yoga and attempt to persuade customers of the benefits that yoga can bring. They ask whether the customers are happy with their bodies, and have them point out which parts they are not happy about. Pointing out the imperfections of people's bodies is an effective way to sell their service; the same strategy is employed in Japanese beauty salons (Miller 2006: 41).

Some classes are also specifically designed to cater to the beauty desires of customers. Ultra-red yoga, with claims that the light waves facilitate slimming, 32°C aroma detox & toning, and full body sculpting are both offered in one studio. At the same time, hot yoga and yoga combat<sup>47</sup>, both involving heavy sweating, which people associate with slimming, are also highly popular. Although hot yoga is popular in various places, yoga combat is said

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<sup>47</sup> Yoga combat is a fusion style of yoga which combines body combat, a group exercise resembling kickboxing, with yoga. In essence, it is half an hour combat, with claims that it has integrated some yoga elements into its content, followed by half an hour of yoga postures to stretch out. It is only offered in one yoga chain in Hong Kong.



to have been invented by an Indian yoga teacher in Hong Kong and is so far seen to be a style unique to Hong Kong.

In the class, teachers have different takes on the slimming effects of yoga. In an Indian studio, the teacher said loudly when students were doing a very tough pose. “You’re slimming up! Keep doing this! You’re the best because you deserve the best! Keep this pose and you’ll lose one kilogram in one class and two kilograms in two classes!” he proclaimed when students had to hold the pose for a count of ten. How explicitly the teachers deal with the slimming effects of yoga has much to do with the style of the studio as well as the individual inclination of the particular teacher. Cindy, a young and beautiful local teacher said, when students were engaging in an abdominal twisting pose, “I know this pose is difficult, and you can take a rest if you want. But doing this pose frequently can prevent constipation and perhaps reduce abdominal fat. Ha! Ha! I am not certain about that, but it is what people say.” A member of the studio told me about a new female teacher. “She tells students that they can slim up from doing yoga because the yoga she teaches can stimulate the lymphatic system. Yet actually all yoga has the same effects on the body. She is just saying that to attract more students.” Looking at these comments, we can see that yoga has been uprooted. Instead of the traditional approach that sees physical yoga as one-eighth of yoga, the bodily benefits from yoga are taken as the whole. Thus it is a form of fetishism of the body.

### *Mirrors and Discipline*

Nothing is more illustrative of this than the presence of mirrors to encourage people to focus on their bodies. Most big yoga studios are lined with mirrors, not only at the front but on three sides or on all four sides of the studio classroom. The omnipresence of mirrors is apparently unique to Hong Kong. This matches with the focus on the body as seen in the

yoga advertisements and sales strategies. Because the body is given such importance and assigned such a value, it is “subjected to a labor of investment (solicitude, obsession)” (Baudrillard 1998: 132). Sarah, who is tall and slim and wears colorful yoga clothes with unique designs to yoga classes, said,

I always find a spot where I can see the mirror. No matter how crowded the studio is, it's always possible to find a spot where you can see yourself in the mirror. It is not just for finding the proper alignment. I also like looking at myself in the yoga pose. Looking at myself in a beautiful pose increases my self-confidence.

She has been doing yoga for three years and has been to India, joining the yoga trip organized by the studio. She is a Buddhist and a vegetarian. Although her yoga experience, belief and diet make her seem like a serious yoga practitioner, her fixation on looking at her body in the mirror contradicts yoga philosophy, at least according to some people I have spoken with. David, owner of a medium-scale studio, who teaches yoga philosophy for a teachers' training course, said,

Yoga practice should be inward looking. It is not about external beauty. Students should not be looking at their bodies when they are engaging in a yoga pose; they should be feeling it from within. It doesn't matter what you wear to yoga or how beautiful your body is. People should turn their attention inwards.

His studio does not have any mirrors.

Cindy, head teacher at a local studio, told me that students love looking at themselves in the mirror although it sidetracks them.

When the students do a pose facing the mirror, they are constantly checking their bodies, their hair.... It takes forever for them to get to the pose. But when they are facing the other side (without a mirror), they get to the pose really quickly. They should really just feel the pose from their body instead of looking at it.

The presence of mirrors is made possible because yoga is a consumption choice, although this violates yoga philosophy according to some people. Stockholder explains the contradiction inherent in mirrors as between “work-discipline, which denies the virtues of self-love, and the attractions of consumption, which make self-love an enticement to



purchase more protection for our inadequate and vulnerable bodies” (1987: 122). This is indeed true in Hong Kong: bodily obsession is encouraged by consumption. Bodily satisfaction may be limited to a small group of people who have nice bodies that they recognize as such; most people may be anxious looking in the mirror. They are nervously comparing themselves to those around them, and are desperately trying to keep up. Instead of hearing comments like that of Sarah about appreciating one’s body, I encountered more negative than positive comments about one’s body from my informants. “My arms are so fat. I don’t like them. Look, you can very easily see it in the mirrors. I need to do more yoga and pilates<sup>48</sup> to firm them up,” said Ellen, a short 50-year-old boutique owner who has a slightly round figure. Thus, mirrors do not always lead to narcissism but perhaps more often bring scrutiny and self-censorship of the body. The presence of mirrors in studios is in line with the omnipresence of reflective surfaces in general in public. I have heard remarks from yoga practitioners from other countries that Hong Kong has a large number of mirrors compared to other cities in the world; whether in shopping malls, on public transport or other places, people are constantly checking themselves out. James, an Englishman who has been living in Hong Kong for three years and does yoga on an irregular basis, said, “This pinpoints the image-conscious nature of this society. Everything is about being body beautiful and it is really important to look good. That is why yoga is like this here.”

### *Studios as Panopticon*

On top of facilitating narcissism, mirrors in studio rooms are also tools for surveillance. Mirrors allow yoga practitioners to see their body figure clearly and monitor

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<sup>48</sup> Pilates is an exercise with the main focus on the core and train the inner muscles. It was originally invented for therapeutic uses but has increasingly become a fitness exercise. Pilates is seen by some as similar to yoga and some people who do yoga also do pilates. I have been told by some informants that pilates is yoga without spirituality.

themselves closely when they are doing the pose; thus they are good tools for enhancing self-discipline. In addition, mirrors make it easier for teachers to check on students while facilitating the students to look at other students. Awareness of the possibility of the instructor's gaze makes students into agents who impose self-discipline on themselves. This brings to mind Foucault's panopticon, where "the perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly" (1984: 191); the mirror-lined studio is such an apparatus. Aside from mirrors, the low-rise stage at the front of the classroom for the teacher further facilitates surveillance. Some teachers are aware of the power of self-discipline and deliberately make it explicit. Cindy, head teacher of a local studio, once said in class, "Don't think I can't see you, and be lazy. I can see every student. Bobby, hold your hands up straighter!" Although she sounded as if she were half-joking, the implications are not slight. Saying that she is looking at all of the students is effectively enhancing the self-discipline students impose on themselves, which is ultimately the most effective form of control. Because the teacher understands this well, and knows that she cannot be looking at everyone at the same time, it is smart of her to tell students this in order to effectively regulate them.

Teachers have much power in disciplining students' bodies outside of class. Sometimes they do this by commenting on students' body figure. "Mei, you've slimmed up a lot," I overheard Cindy telling one of the students. Cindy seems to be very aware of how Foucauldian "mild" punishment works:

Even if they do not make use of violent or bloody punishment, even when they use 'lenient' methods involving confinement or correction, it is always the body that is at issue—the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission. (Foucault 1984: 172)

Although it seems that Cindy is exerting control on the students' bodies, the regulation and control over the body works both ways; both the students' and the teachers' bodies are put under scrutiny. Although members of the studio largely approve of and to a degree look up



to the ultra-slim figure of Cindy, students sometimes gossip about the bodies of the less slender teachers. A member of the studio said about one teacher, Sharon, “After coming back from the retreat in Thailand, she has gotten fatter. Every time she comes back from there, she gains some weight. She really does not look very athletic.” Teachers’ bodies are constantly being judged, even more so than those of students. A fit body is very much a teacher’s asset to demonstrate her ability in yoga and to convince students that yoga works, just as the bodies of the fitness instructors are put under close scrutiny in Japanese fitness clubs (Spielvogel 2003: 24).

Mirrors are good tools for surveillance and enhance control of the body. Perhaps the studio environment, with the mirrors as a major component, are a major factor leading students to lose weight. As I will discuss in the next section, slimming may not come from doing the exercise itself.

### *The Slimming Myth*

Many people talk extensively about yoga and its effects on slimming. Ellen describes her experience as follows,

Since I started yoga, my arms have become much firmer, and my whole body has become more slender. Yoga is magical because it helps me sculpt my body. Last month I went swimming with my friends. They all thought that I must have lost 20 lbs, but actually I have only lost a few pounds. I am so happy!

A person who tried a yoga class at the studio for the first time came out of a “restorative yoga” class, which is supposed to be relaxing and restoring participants’ energy. She told her friend she did not like it because she did not sweat. This reveals her expectation of yoga as an exercise for slimming. Another yoga practitioner, Joanna, told me, “yoga activates the *chakras*—the energy points—in the body, that’s why people slim up from it. It is very effective. At one point I felt my body was so dry—like human jerky—that I had to cut down going to the yoga studio.” Amanda, a senior teacher at a local studio

commented on the supposedly slimming effects of hot yoga. “It increases your metabolism during that hour and you sweat more. It is supposed to clean the facial pores. But after you drink water, the weight comes back.”

Despite the belief that yoga can help slim up the body, some students have become increasingly aware that it is not necessarily yoga as an exercise that has allowed them to slim up. Instead, it may have more to do with the schedule that they have taken up after starting yoga. Depending on the teacher, yoga practitioners are told that they should not eat one to four hours before doing yoga. Yoga students are also advised not to eat an hour after class. I argue that, aside from the practical fact that a full stomach may make exercising uncomfortable, this strategy creates the slimming effects of yoga. Following the advice of the teachers, students may not be able to eat for up to five hours, and as classes are often in the evenings, after work, students do not often have time for a proper meal. There is a post on the yoga group in [discuss.hk](http://discuss.hk), a popular online forum, devoted to the issue of how to prolong the time after one has taken a yoga class before having a meal. Bloggers have suggested that one could take a long shower, chat with fellow classmates, and then go to a popular restaurant so that they would have to wait for seats. Underlying this is the belief that if one eats quickly after exercising, then the body would absorb the nutrients quickly and the effort spent and calories burned from exercise would go to waste. Recurrently, slimming has been discussed on this message board. Many of the yoga practitioners who go to yoga after work sacrifice the proper meal time for yoga classes and usually have small simple meals such as bread and soup. This change of lifestyle and food consumption patterns indeed has an impact on allowing people to become more slender.

Studies have shown that yoga is not effective for weight reduction. According to an article in *Time*, “a typical 50-min. class of *hatha* yoga...burns off fewer calories than are in three Oreos—about the same as a slow, 50-minutes walk. Even power yoga burns fewer



calories than a comparable session of calisthenics” (Paul 2007). There are also medical experts who challenge the health effects that yoga claims to bring. One exercise physiologist says that most styles of yoga do not cover the four elements which are essential for achieving “total fitness: aerobics, flexibility, muscular strength, and muscular endurance” (Isaacs 2007). Thus, despite some yoga practitioners’ and teachers’ proclamations of the health effects of yoga, this seems unjustified.

Precisely because it is unlikely that yoga can really help one lose weight, it is very much like Michael Taussig’s analysis of shamanism and its resemblance to fraud. He stated that fraud is a large part of a shaman’s healing but it is precisely because of the presence of fraud that the healing works. Although everyone knows that a large part of shamanistic procedure is not true, a majority of people still believe in it, as this faith in the shamanistic practice requires skepticism in order to work (Taussig 2003: 272). This resembles the health and slimming promises linked to yoga. People want to believe in the promises that yoga can bring although they know that the slimming effects may not really be true and studios may not be entirely honest. But it is partially the trust in the slimming effects of yoga which motivates people to persist in going to yoga classe. Thus although yoga may not be the best workout for slimming, the exercise itself and skipping proper meals make the slimming work. Informants who failed to lose weight often blamed themselves for being too lazy. They believe if they go often enough to yoga classes, they will eventually slim down. Whether yoga is essentially effective as a slimming exercise or whether it is better explained by Taussig as a matter of faith, is immaterial in this context. What matters is that the slimming rhetoric surrounding yoga works in attracting customers.

### **Yoga and the Fetishism of the Body in Hong Kong**

All of the above shows that yoga is overwhelmingly sold and consumed as an exercise

for the beautification of the body. “Yoga in Hong Kong is all about being conscious of your body! But yoga should really be about transcending the body... It has become such a dilemma in Hong Kong,” said James, an Englishman whom we have seen earlier in the chapter. He pointed at the directory at a lift lobby, signaling a yoga studio “Yoga Sanctuary” on the left and a beauty salon “Body Conscious” on the right. He continued, “Yoga has become a beauty regime for people to get fit; everyone wants to lose weight from doing it. It has lost its essence.” This fixation and emphasis on the body’s beauty is reducing the body to a commodity, James is implying, reminiscent of Marx’s idea of commodity fetishism, transforming things from their use value into exchange value. That is why Baudrillard said that the body is represented “as capital and as fetish (or consumer object)” (1998: 130). The fetishism of the body in yoga seems to be different from what Nancy Scheper-Hughes discussed in the trafficking of human organs (2002) although both are due to global capitalism and result in reducing the body into a commodity. In the case of human organ trafficking, the actual body parts become sellable, while in the case of yoga, the body becomes a capital. Yoga is marketed as a tool for fixing one’s body, and carries resonance going far beyond aesthetics.

### *Body as Capital*

Mimi, a 20-year-old college student living in public housing<sup>49</sup>, admits that she does yoga as a form of investment. “It is an investment in the body; it is better than buying clothes or engaging in other leisure activities. After all, only the body belongs to you. I want to have better health so that I can be more ready for the challenges ahead.” She does yoga every day and her three elder sisters all do yoga at the same studio. She is also considering becoming a yoga teacher. In this way, the body has become very much a direct

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<sup>49</sup> Public housing is a form of housing built and subsidized by the government, mainly for poor people who cannot afford their own apartment. Some forty to fifty percent of Hong Kong’s population stays in this kind of estate, which is a considerably higher percentage than that in other cities in the developed world.



form of capital, and an investment for her; as I mentioned before, the body of a yoga teacher is vital for gaining approval from students. This is like the Marxist idea of fetishism of commodities, although this time it is the body, instead of other goods, that has been commodified, becoming a capital, and is believed to be effective in bringing in money in the future (Marx [1867]1974: 77). Like Mimi, many people talk about health effects as their motivation for doing yoga. However, it is sometimes seen as just a manifestation of the obsession with external beauty. Featherstone asserts that the inner body, concerned with health and requiring maintenance and repair, and the outer body, which is appearance, movement and control within social space, are conjoined in contemporary societies. He argues that very often the “prime purpose of the maintenance of the inner body becomes the enhancement of the appearance of the outer body” (Featherstone 1991: 171), and this can be applied to analyzing some practitioners’ motivation for doing yoga.

However, the pursuit of a slender body through yoga can have further implications beyond beauty; it can also have strong implications related to money. Jessica, a woman in her early thirties who has been doing yoga for a year, made a capitalistic analysis of the importance of keeping the body fit:

Keeping the body fit can give a person more self-confidence. Appearance is very important in Hong Kong. If you are in good shape and look good, the boss will notice it and it can help you in career development. That is why some people do yoga, and others go through cosmetic surgery.

Her comments illustrate the value of a fit body as bodily capital, which she believes, is highly useful for gaining monetary capital.

### *Body as Class Signifier*

We have seen that the training of the body through yoga is sometimes seen as a form of investment, and that even health may just be an excuse to fetishize on the body’s beauty. The body carries much “value”. Although I do not disagree with Jessica’s comment that a

slim body can lead to monetary gains, I proceed in the opposite direction and argue that the body in itself can tell much about a person's class standing. Very often, although yoga practitioners may not be consciously aware of it, what underlies their fetishism of the body is closely related to the distinction that a slim body can bring. It is because the body itself is a signifier of social status (Baudrillard 1998: 131 and Bourdieu 1984) that many people pay so much attention to it. Turner asserts that the body is a tool to display wealth and lifestyle through dress, posture and cosmetics (1991: 6). Bourdieu contends that

Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is, embodied, helps to shape the class body. It is an incorporated principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporation, choosing and modifying everything that the body ingests and digests and assimilates, physiologically and psychologically. It follows that the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste (1984: 190).

According to Bourdieu, the body is the perfect indicator of class taste. However, "taste" is not inherent or objective. It is legitimized by those in power and embodied in people. Fussell (1983) observes that in the United States, it is member of the proletariat who are fat. Seeing the large percentage of obese people in the U.S., he asserts that being thin is a cheap way to achieve distinction (1983: 52). Santo points to the slender body as a middle-class ideal, whereas fatness shows the incapability to capture the class-based cultural and aesthetic values accompanying a middle-class economic position (Santo 2002: 191). "The fat body displayed - literally inscribed - excess and enabled a reading of lack of self-governance. Fat was seen to be a cultural property of excess" (Skeggs 2004: 102), providing a contrast with the middle-class body. Yet getting a fit body is not only the desire of the middle class; the pursuit of a slim body can be seen as an effort by all classes of people to gain social status.

In chapter 1, I have seen that education is a main criterion determining how yoga practitioners see yoga. People who do physical yoga usually have a secondary education or local university education, and their attributes put them in the category of middle class.



They can afford to go to private clubs for yoga, speak a bit of English and can go on overseas vacations. Some of the practitioners who like to take on the spiritual path have received university education or above, and have often lived abroad or come from other countries. Many of these practitioners have come from a good family background, allowing them to pursue a good education, often in the West. They speak fluent English and have adapted to a Western lifestyle, making them upper-middle class within the Hong Kong context. Their family backgrounds are often in the middle class, but the education they received allowed them to get well-paying jobs. This group is more likely to have access to spiritual yoga and develop an interest in it.

As stated in chapter 1, according to Bourdieu (1978), the working class tends to have an instrumental use of the body while the middle class or above tends to treat the body more as an end in itself (1978: 838). Although I do not agree with the relationship to the body Bourdieu describes, it seems apparent that people with different educational background indeed have different attitudes towards the body. Education, in turn, has a relationship with social class, where a higher education often guarantees a well-paid job, thus bringing a higher social status in the long run, as we have discussed above. However, in the context of Hong Kong, yoga, the attitude towards the body in relation to social class seems opposite to what Bourdieu has suggested. People with comparatively less education, who are often those from a middle-class background, tend to focus on yoga as a slimming exercise. Going up in education level, and often consequentially, higher up on the social ladder, at the upper-middle class there is a stronger tendency for the practitioners to focus beyond the body.

Despite the popularization of yoga, it is largely available only to the middle class or above. But within the middle class, we see much difference in values. Those from the lower-middle class, who may be new to the middle class, tend to see yoga as something

concerned with the body and looking good. These people discuss in detail the bodily effects of yoga and how it beautifies their bodies. Cecilia, a 55-year-old part-time yoga, dance and drawing teacher who has received primary education, and started learning yoga six years ago, said:

I don't really know which style of yoga I am doing, but it doesn't matter. It's a mix of everything. Everyone who does yoga just wants to slim up, and they are not interested in anything else. That's why I teach them a special style of slimming yoga. Through clearing the lymph nodes, yoga postures can slim people up. When I tell my students the posture can slim them up, they hold the pose until they drop! ... I'm not interested in the yoga religion, those who are interested in it should go learn from some Indians or go to India.

People like Cecilia, with a low educational background, may emphasize the slimming effects of yoga, and avoid spirituality in yoga or refuse to consider it. On the other hand, as we will see in the next chapter, those with more education in their background show a strong tendency to go into the spiritual level of yoga.

We have looked at how a slender body is a strong form of capital. This seems true for men as well, but the effects seem to be much more prevalent for women. Bodily capital seems to carry extra meaning for women. Part-time yoga teacher Eva, whom we have seen in previous chapters, attributed the overwhelming ratio of female to male yoga students to the need to secure men. Facing competition from women across the border in mainland China, local women have increasing pressure to find a man, she said. Thus these women may buy into the sexualized image of yoga specifically targeted at them, and give much effort into keeping their bodies slim by engaging in yoga. While women in their twenties are working hard on their bodies, married women also try hard to stay youthful-looking and slim as this may be a good way to keep their husbands. This is applicable to Mandy. She likes to claim she is doing yoga "purely for herself". But at the same time, her frequent remarks about her body and others' bodies suggest that this is not true. She once asked me, anxiously as she saw me at the yoga studio: "Maggie, look at my arms! Have they gotten



bigger? Be honest with me! I have not come to yoga for two weeks!” Her anxiety towards her body may contradict her statement that she is doing yoga purely for herself. On another occasion, she told me how she had lost a substantial amount of weight from doing “too much yoga” and her husband said he did not like her being too slim. Therefore, her yoga practice is clearly not purely for herself but is a way to gain recognition from other people as well, with her husband being a significant person from whom she gathers approval. The effect yoga can have on slimming the body can explain why she is spending so much time on yoga instead of other leisure activities. As mentioned before, Mandy is a life-member of the yoga studio and its sister fitness chain, which shows her dedication to training her body. This can be seen as a way to keep her looks from fading too fast, perhaps important for keeping her husband, and herself happy. Mandy is not alone. Although most yoga practitioners who have been learning yoga for a long period would not say bluntly that they are doing yoga for slimming and to be more attractive, it often was the initial motivation for them to start yoga. Their behavior and concerns over their body figure shows that most of them still care greatly about keeping their bodies slender through yoga, and hope to gain recognition from others in their wider social circle.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have looked at the significance of the strong bodily focus of yoga in Hong Kong. I will first go through the main points in this chapter, and then conclude with an analysis of an advertisement which brings out the characteristics of yoga in Hong Kong.

Sexual images of yoga are portrayed in the media, and slimming is widely seen as the main purpose for doing yoga. The preference for an extremely slim body in Hong Kong is propagated by yoga, and yoga studios have tailored classes especially catering for slimming needs. The omnipresent mirrors in studios act as a manifestation of bodily narcissism, and

perhaps more significantly, as a tool, like Foucault's panopticon, to control the yoga practitioners so that they impose close surveillance and self-discipline on their bodies. I also looked into the slimming myth concerning yoga, and concluded that it may not be yoga itself that makes yoga practitioners slim, but rather the effect of yoga on their daily life, causing students to skip proper meals.

The overwhelming concern for the body to a large extent disregards and even violates the principles of yoga philosophy; thus I consider it fetishism of the body. However, I argue that body fetishism is not done purely for aesthetics reasons. A slim body carries a middle-class image, thus people are keen to do yoga in order to achieve such an image, to present themselves as belonging to that or a higher class. According to Bourdieu (1978), people from different classes tend to have different usage of the body. However, the usage of yoga in Hong Kong is different from that stated by Bourdieu, that people from the working class have an instrumental use of the body while those from privileged classes tend to treat the body as an end in itself to appreciate the body. We have found a tendency that mostly people from the lower-middle or middle class have purely physical claims about yoga, and those from the upper-middle class are more interested in spiritual yoga, as will be elaborated next chapter.

Let me conclude this chapter with a yoga advertisement, as it is infamous in Hong Kong but represents everything yoga is not in Hong Kong. The advertisement is a recurring topic of comments offered by people, whether they are yoga practitioners or not. It is a TV advertisement for a yoga studio being played on the bus channel<sup>50</sup>, an advertisement which most people find extremely ugly. It shows a Hong Kong Chinese man in his early 40s, topless, demonstrating a breathing technique with his stomach completely sucked in so that his abdominal area appears hollow and his ribcage protrudes. He moves the air inside his

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<sup>50</sup> Some buses in Hong Kong are installed with TV screens, playing programmes by a broadcast company catering especially for showing on buses. It also has many advertisements.



abdomen in a circular motion. As might be imagined, this does not look very appealing.

Yet, aside from disgust on the physical level, I attribute the reason people reject this ad to the fact that it has totally violated the imagination people associate with yoga. First of all, the person in the advertisement is male, which goes against the dominant female image of yoga in Hong Kong. Secondly, he is neither young nor good-looking, going against the aestheticism people attribute to yoga. Thirdly, if he were Indian, playing up the exoticism of yoga might have been a good strategy. But as a local male promoting the more exotic side of yoga, this plainly seems out of place. Furthermore, the ad does not carry a relaxing and beautiful image of yoga; the teacher is not good-looking, and the background of the ad is not a pictorial representation of nature. This style of traditional local yoga, showing nothing but the body as the main concern, goes against the popular imagination of yoga in Hong Kong today. The ad carries no exoticism, no beautiful bodies and no social status associations. Thus it is a perfect illustration of what yoga is not in Hong Kong. It is little wonder that the studio is struggling, although the teacher who teaches there is quite well-known.

## Chapter 6

### Beyond the Body? Spirituality and Distinction

Looking at yoga practitioners in Hong Kong, the higher one proceeds up the ladder of social class, the more prevalent is the making of spiritual claims about yoga that go beyond the body. This presents a situation that, as we saw last chapter, is a complete reversal of Bourdieu (1978: 838), who argues that people from higher social classes are likely to use the body as an end in itself purely for appreciation while people from middle-class backgrounds tend to use the body for instrumental purposes. Instead, what I have found in this research is that people from the middle class focus on working on their bodies in order to become slender and beautiful, while better-educated people from the upper-middle class are less willing to focus on the body. This, I argue, represents an intricate social status representation for people from the middle class, as most people who participate in yoga are middle class or above. This chapter looks at how practitioners may use the rhetoric of going beyond the body in yoga. Spiritual yoga practitioners in their rhetoric do indeed claim to go beyond the body, but I have found that in effect, their focus on the body is at least as intense as those who see yoga as a physical pursuit, as I will explain.

As I earlier discussed, social class is a vague concept and is very difficult to define. Earlier studies on class in Hong Kong have shown that a simple definition of class does not work as there are multiple factors affecting class status. Although this thesis does relate to the discussion of social class in Hong Kong, the focus is on how people present themselves in order to gain social status. I am not going to probe into the difficult task of defining the



different classes in Hong Kong here, beyond the approximate formulations I have already offered. However, I have found a broad social-class pattern in Hong Kong related to yoga, that it is very much defined by education level. Education level has a large effect in determining yoga practitioners' inclination towards yoga, either towards the bodily or spiritual. The higher the education level, the more likely one is to engage in spiritual yoga. A high education level is also significant in adding to one's social status. Education is often a way to determine one's job and subsequently one's social class. Meanwhile, education also facilitates the accumulation of cultural/knowledge capital, which, as we shall see, is a good way for presenting oneself as being sophisticated and cultured, useful for asserting one's social status, as we will investigate in this chapter.

### **Yoga and Spirituality**

Although most people doing yoga in Hong Kong are concerned with the body, a small fraction of people make spiritual claims about yoga. Traditionally, yoga spirituality receives much respect. Judging from fieldwork in a few studios, this traditional attitude is followed in Hong Kong today, with teachers identifying with spiritual yoga occupying a more senior position and students who know about yoga philosophy most respected. However, this is not fully clear, because yoga practitioners who have been engaged in physical yoga for a long time have a strong tendency to go into spirituality; thus very often those who are followers of spiritual yoga are experts in physical yoga. However, these relations are not absolute, as we will explore in this chapter.

While the dominant motivation for doing yoga in Hong Kong is to slim up the body, people from a upper-middle class or above may show a deliberate intention to transcend the body. They very often go extensively into the abstract spiritual rhetoric of yoga as their motivation and do not mention the pursuit of physical beauty and slimming as their reason.

Singleton (2005), when discussing the secularized form of yoga in today's England, observes that it is the hint of spirituality in this modern form of yoga which gives it extra allure and value. Yoga is often

underpinned by notions of a personalized spirituality which can be directly accessed through physical practice and the ensuing relaxation. Yoga not only combats stress: relinquishing tension during formalized relaxation sessions, it is said, leads to self-realisation or at the very least furnishes insights into one's fundamental, true, and eternal nature. I contend that this discourse of 'spiritualised' relaxation in yoga is a relatively new and composite phenomenon. (Singleton 2005: 289)

Kate is a good example to illustrate this. She sees yoga as a physical pursuit but also much more than that: it is a spiritual practice. Yoga "deeply influences my thoughts, behaviors and intentions, daily," she said. "I do it as a form of reaching inwards and seeing what I really feel, how to heal the stresses of the day, and rid myself of toxins that overwhelm our systems living in polluted urban clusters."

Another informant, Caroline, exemplifies the desire to reach a state of bodily transcendence. Caroline, like Kate, is a young Hong Kong Chinese woman. She goes to physical yoga classes at least three times a week but refuses to consider yoga a workout for the body. "I don't see yoga as an exercise *at all*. It's all about centering and getting myself back into place... It is not about whether you push it or not, the point is to *focus* and *breathe*<sup>51</sup>," she said. This can be analyzed using Lamont's findings from studying the upper-middle class in the U.S. and France, showing that people draw cultural boundaries and define themselves in opposition to the mainstream culture by "refusing a certain way of life" (Lamont 1992: 101). In yoga, as slimming and bodily focus is predominantly the focus of the mainstream of middle-class students, this is what students such as her may reject. A young lady in her late twenties, Caroline was wearing a pair of yellow *Prada* high heels when I met her at a spiritual yoga event, where participants chant instead of do physical yoga. It was held at an upscale yoga center chain, It was also where I first met Kate.

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<sup>51</sup> Caroline said the italicized words in English during our Cantonese conversation.



Although making much effort to downplay the physical aspects of yoga, Caroline has just returned from watching a yoga competition in Calcutta, India, with an Indian teacher from whom she takes classes in a studio in Hong Kong and another member of the studio Anna, who performed. Caroline finds it important to learn from different sources to enhance her understanding of yoga and improve her practice; thus she is a member of the two biggest yoga studio chains in Hong Kong. This seems to parallel Veblen's statement that those from respectable society may justify sports participation with the fact that it aids personal development (Veblen 2005[1899]: 90-1). Giving me the reason why she does yoga, Kate said,

I've always been interested in meditation and Tibetan Buddhism, but never found that ultimate slice of peace, "heaven" or glimpses of nirvana that people often mention. In yoga I found it, this amazing sense of inner peace and calm, centering all that is me...

Kate is a 26-year-old editor of an international travel guide who speaks perfect English, and dresses stylishly. She has received secondary and university education in North America and lived in Europe for three years. She has been doing yoga on and off for six years, practicing different styles of yoga. On top of yoga, she also studies Tibetan Buddhism with a monk and said it helps her in meditation, a spiritual part of yoga. She has recently resumed her Vedanta<sup>52</sup> classes after a short pause. She told me that half of her bookshelf is yoga-related, with topics related to spirituality, Zen, Osho, India, meditation and Buddhism; she calls herself a "New Age bookworm freak". Kate is a typical case of people shopping in the "spiritual cultural supermarket" (Mathews 2000), taking up yoga, Tibetan Buddhism, and Vedanta. From what Mathews has found, in America, it is the upper-middle class with much dispensable income who develop an interest in Tibetan Buddhism (2000: 107); the same is true for Hong Kong. Tibetan Buddhism, as practiced by Kate, is largely considered

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<sup>52</sup> Vedanta is in essence, Indian philosophies as Kate explained it. To be more exact, Vedanta is a vast spiritual tradition within Hinduism.

foreign and carries a strong exotic image in Hong Kong, and Vedanta is an even more alien philosophical system, largely unknown to most Hong Kong people. Similar to that described of American society, the practice of such an exotic religion may have underlying class meanings, indicating that one is coming from an upper-middle class background.

Compared to Tibetan Buddhism and Vedanta, yoga is a much more common practice and works more on the body. Mathews has found that not everyone is free to choose from the cultural supermarket, but “wealth as well as knowledge is the currency of the cultural supermarket, enabling one to have maximum informed choice in shaping oneself and world” (Mathews 2000: 100). Thus the fact that Kate can go into this mix of yoga, Vedanta and Tibetan Buddhism is to a large extent due to her possession of education, knowledge, and economic capital.

Interest in yoga philosophy, or spirituality, and further, a full understanding of it, is a way to gain social status. Since the philosophy is difficult to understand, if one can comprehend it, it leads to a rise in social status. “Yoga is the control of the fluctuation of the mind,” one of the yoga teachers told me, citing a verse from the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, the classic authority of yoga scriptures. This may be easy to understand, but consider another verse from the same book, “When there is non-thirst for even the *gunas* (constituents of Nature) due to realization of the *Purusha* (true Self), that is supreme non-attachment (1990 [1978]: 28)”. This could challenge even those who see themselves as intellectuals if they do not have much background in Buddhism or Indian philosophies.

Yoga practitioners who go into these philosophies may not be consciously pursuing them for the sake of distinction, but it is effective as distinction because it is exclusive: it takes good English (as most of the text were written or translated from Sanskrit into English) and much time to immerse oneself in yoga in order to obtain this knowledge. People with little education and cultural capital often see yoga spirituality as mystical, as



beyond rational capacity, thus further preventing them from comprehending it. On top of lacking the ability to understand yoga philosophies, they are also short of the linguistic ability to discuss yoga on a level that goes beyond the body. Therefore those with little cultural capital are left with a one-dimensional view of yoga, which concerns the body. I will devote the next section to discussing this.

### *Yoga and Mysticism*

While yoga spirituality is highly appreciated by a small group of people, it is a barrier for those with little education. Their declaring it as mystical and thus irrational could be seen as resistance against those who regard spirituality as higher and more prestigious. Eugenia, a clerk in her early 40s, who has been doing yoga for three years, said:

I'm not very worried about yoga but am weary of meditation, where they make this ocean sound and sing in this language... I try to avoid thinking about the meaning behind yoga. This yoga center is actually a Hindu organization, but they just shy away from using their religion and present it as an exercise to people.

She lives in an old and traditional Chinese building. She said doing yoga has helped her climb the stairs to go home. Eugenia's reference to yoga spirituality as linked to a cult or religion may have less to do with her relatively short immersion in yoga (two years) than to her lack of cultural capital to understand and make sense of that "exotic" culture. At the same time, experienced teachers may also hold the same view.

Master Fung Wai Shing (referred to in Cantonese, not in English, unlike Indian masters), who is, as earlier discussed, an experienced yoga teacher who has been teaching for 40 years, is an example of this, as I will now discuss.

Although yoga philosophy states that spirituality is the ultimate goal and physical yoga a tool for achieving that goal, one's attitude towards yoga is not solely determined by how long one has been doing yoga. Master Fung, who learned from the Indian masters in the late 1950s and started the yoga classes at the "Worker's Union Leisure Center" in 1980

has no knowledge of yoga philosophy. He sees anything that goes beyond the body in yoga as mystical. “People have said that after practicing yoga, one can lie in a coffin for 30 days, and then come back to life. I don’t believe in any of these things. If you take yoga beyond an exercise, then it becomes cultic and weird,” he said.

Despite his long experience in yoga, he dismisses yoga philosophy and treats yoga as an exercise to train the body, with particular effects on breathing and flexibility. He emphasizes that his style of yoga is scientific, with special concerns towards health because he wanted to remove the mysticism and negative image associated with yoga. All teachers from that generation in Hong Kong have the same physical interpretation of yoga although many are rich and from respectable professions, such as engineering, medicine, and business. However, this does not weaken the linkage between social distinction and inclination towards yoga spirituality, which is the thesis of this research. At the time these teachers began yoga during the 1960s, Hong Kong was quite poor as it had not undergone major economic development. It did not have much international trade or wealth, and food was not necessarily easy to come by for most people. The GDP per capita at that time was relatively low, at the level of that of South Africa, Peru and Greece in that same decade (Dorn 1998). Under such economic situations, yoga, as a new exercise introduced from “exotic” India carried strong distinction, even though yoga was in its purely physical form. As Fung said, yoga was valued for its effects in strengthening the body. Being a track and field athlete, he was introduced to yoga by his uncle, who was also a student in those early Indian-taught classes. One of the reasons he gave for doing yoga was that his body was seriously weakened during a time of drought<sup>53</sup>; thus he wanted yoga to strengthen his body. Over the years, tens of thousands of students have attended courses originally designed by him, which treat yoga purely as an exercise with no reference to yoga spirituality. Despite

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<sup>53</sup> Hong Kong suffered from two major droughts in 1963 and 1967. People had to queue up on the streets for water.



its long tradition, Master Fung's yoga, short of spiritual elements, is taught in a leisure center offering different classes at a minimal rate, as it has been for the past 30 years; it does not receive particular recognition in the wider yoga circle in Hong Kong, which is dominated by large commercial chains today. He also used to give private lessons to celebrities in the 1960s and 1970s, as did some other local male teachers at that time. However, "traditional" yoga in Hong Kong, represented by this breed of teachers, which does not contain any spiritual elements, no longer carries much distinction today.

The case of purely physical yoga propagated by experienced teachers like Master Fung provides an essential generational aspect that must be taken into account when considering the intricate distinction between body and spirituality in yoga. The "traditional" yoga in Hong Kong—the tradition inherited from Indian masters in the 1950s and modified by local teachers—received distinction at that time even though it did not involve any spiritual element. As Hong Kong's economy developed in the last fifty years, and with yoga being hugely popularized, the focus on the body alone fails to give this old local style of yoga prestige<sup>54</sup>. This lack of prestige of the "traditional" yoga in Hong Kong today matches the thesis that purely physical yoga is at the lower end while yoga adorned with spirituality hints sits higher in the distinction hierarchy in Hong Kong.

Having been teaching for more than 40 years, Fung has not encountered students who are interested in yoga philosophies and thinks that if people are interested, they would not go to the "ordinary Workers' Union Center" (which offers classes for a minimal price) to learn but would go elsewhere, to the private studios to learn. This demonstrates how Fung is aware of the class connotation of yoga spirituality that is the more recent trend.

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<sup>54</sup> This can also explain partially why aerobics does not carry much prestige when compared with yoga these days, some informants who have turned from aerobics to yoga told me they prefer yoga because it is more complicated and less physical, making it more interesting, as it is more concerned with the inner parts of the body and the small minor muscles which one cannot easily see, instead of merely focusing on the exterior of the body like in aerobics. This is not totally a contrast between the physical and the spiritual, but it has similar implications that the more outward and superficial physicality is less highly regarded compared to the more internal physicality.



## Beyond the Body?

Spiritual yoga practitioners not only present themselves as having a strong interest in yoga philosophy, they also have a tendency to appear as if they have transcended the body, to distance themselves from physical yoga practitioners. The effort could either be directed outward, beyond the physical/external body onto the larger world, or inward, deep into the person, into the soul, and is more common in the Western or upscale studios. Both paths seem to imply that people do yoga for a higher reason, one that transcends the bodily level. Using examples from physical and spiritual yoga classes, I will now illustrate how yoga leads people to go into the world and into the soul.

### *Outwards: Beyond the Self and Into the World*

Extending the benefits of yoga to other people and to the world can allow people to feel good about themselves and about the activity of yoga. Often, physical classes start with students sitting in cross-legged positions, eyes closed, chanting “*om*”<sup>55</sup> three times. *Om* is said to be the most basic and universal sound of the universe. Chanting it, according to some teachers in the private studios, can cleanse the mind and body and get one ready for yoga. At the same time, I have encountered some teachers in private studios who claim that chanting it together can connect the students and raise the energy level of the class. However, in the Workers’ Union, the teacher has a more health-oriented reasoning for

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<sup>55</sup> *Om* has various meanings. It is said to be the most basic and universal sound of the universe and is common in Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Some teachers explain that the vibration induced in the person when making that sound can cleanse the mind and body of the person to have a calming effect. However, I have been told by more than one teacher that they are cautious not to introduce it in the beginners’ class because they are afraid that it would scare away students because it has a quasi-religious feel to it. At one of the Western studios I have been to, there is a magazine article posted in the changing room explaining what the word/syllable means and telling students that they have a choice whether to do it or not. From my observation, I have found that two factors have an effect on the volume of the *om* in the class: the level of the class and the image of the studio. The more advanced the class, the louder the *om*; at the same time, less importantly, the more Western- and Indian-inclined the studio, the softer the sound. It shows students’ willingness to join the chant. At the same time, *om* has gained a reputation as “the symbol” for yoga. Many of the “serious” practitioners wear an *om* pendant. Doing so is almost like telling people that one is dedicated to yoga.



chanting *om*. Instead of discussing energy levels, she said that it would make a person feel more relaxed and calm. At one of the classes at an upscale studio, the teacher said at the end of the class, “It was a very good practice. Thank you for your energy. Bring the spirit of today’s practice with you, and to the people around you. May the peacefulness stay with you. *Namaste*.” This is suggesting that the person’s participation in a class is not only beneficial to the self but is at the same time contributing to the other classmates, as one’s energy can enhance the practice of other students in the class. At another studio, the teacher discussed how one is going beyond the self and devoting the practice to another person, making it almost seem like a prayer. The Western teacher said at the beginning of class, “dedicate today’s practice to your loved ones. Think of the person during this hour of practice, and offer it to him or her.” Thus students are led to believe that their doing yoga can produce much good for others while benefiting themselves. All these seem to add much value to yoga, making the activity more enticing.

Indeed, there are yoga functions that attract people based on that rationale. The “Global Mala Project”<sup>56</sup>, an international event to spread peace through yoga, where yoga practitioners around the world come to yoga studios to pray for world peace by doing physical yoga and chanting *mantras/kirtan*<sup>57</sup>. It has the slogan: “Rise! Yoga as Peace in Action,” and “Off the Mat, into the World.” The organizers also have slogans like “spread the love, spread the peace” and “love is my religion,” tying love to yoga and creating an impression that yoga practitioners can spread love through yoga. This rhetoric of going

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<sup>56</sup> At the event, participants did 108 sun salutation (the most common yoga posture series) and 108 *kirtans* together. The logic is that through doing yoga and chanting *kirtan*, yoga practitioners around the world can be united and spread world peace. (<http://www.globalmala.org/about.php>)

<sup>57</sup> *Mantras* are originally religious poems from a Vedic origin and in Sanskrit. In yoga studios in Hong Kong, they are often chanted without strong religious association. At one of the mantra chanting classes I have been to, the students refer to it as singing, and convinced me to join them because it is “a lot of fun with a group of people singing together.” People often do not know the meaning of the *mantras* they are chanting, and most of them only understand a phrase of two in each mantra or have a vague idea what each mantra refers to. *Kirtan* is a form of singing mantra, accompanied by Indian classical instruments. From what I have gathered, only two commercial yoga studios in Hong Kong offer such classes. They are the major studios of the two biggest yoga chains.



beyond oneself and into the world is very much a Western phenomenon, with origins, perhaps, in the New Age movement. The studio which held this event in Hong Kong, “Pure Yoga”, has a high percentage of Western members with almost fifty percent of the total, especially in the particular outlet in Central where they had this function. Few yoga activities organized by studios targeting a mainly local audience have such slogans. The content of the event is that people make donations to participate, and they do some rounds of sun salutation, the best-known yoga sequence, and chant a certain number of mantras. Most of the people attending the event did not understand the meanings of the mantras but still did them nonetheless, and were curious to know more. It seems doubtful whether doing physical yoga and chanting mantras which did not make sense to them could generate love and peace; but it is an obvious way of linking yoga, generally perceived as an individual act for beautifying the body or finding internal peace, to the greater well-being of the world.

*Inwards: Going within your Body, Into your Soul*

Along with going outwards into the world, efforts are also made to focus inwards, going beneath the superficial body, and into the soul. Body and soul are the two basic premises forming the duality of yoga. Teachings often instructs people to be aware that a person is not the body, but the soul.

At the Indian studio, a teacher would say “*om namah shivaya*” at the beginning or at the end of a class. He explained that it means “salutation to the consciousness/soul inside me.” This is explicitly linking physical yoga to awareness of the soul. However, he does not always explain the meaning in class; therefore many of the students may not understand the meaning of the phrase. “*Hari om tsa*” is another phrase that he often uses, to remind people that they are one part of god<sup>58</sup>. Both phrases are encouraging students to draw their

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<sup>58</sup> God here can refer to the god from any religion. Teachers advocate the concept of god in yoga as all



attention away from the external body and concentrate within. At the same time, the teacher also explained that we must take good care of our body because it is the temple of god, where god resides. All these are efforts to link the physical practice of yoga to inner being.

*Kirtan*, singing meditation, is explained as yoga for the heart. During such a session, there are a few people playing some classical Indian musical instruments and leading *mantras*<sup>59</sup>. The teacher said, “we’re always caught up with things up here (pointing to the head). *Kirtan* helps us open our heart and get rid of things that are holding us up... *Kirtan* practice can be as difficult as *asana* practice, as it could be difficult to open your heart.” *Kirtan* is a form of spiritual yoga, and many devoted physical yoga practitioners develop an interest in it. It is one of the entry points for physical yoga practitioners to understand yoga spirituality. Although *kirtan* is not concerned with the physical body, all the participants on that occasion had fit and athletic bodies and no excessive fat. At the same time, the teacher was also dressed in a sleeveless top and pants, showing her fit body. This was the third time I met this teacher. During the first two times we met, she was dressed in an Indian-style loose top and pants, but this time, after she had become part of the faculty of the upscale studio, she was dressed in more athletic and figure-hugging clothes. It may be due to the fact that she needs to present an image that she has a fit body to gain validity for going into the spiritual practice. But at the same time, it is ironic that she should display her body and figure while she was displaying a practice that transcends the body. A fit body is the basis for gaining the respect and authority to discuss yoga spirituality in Hong Kong, as will be discussed in the next section.

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encompassing and including all gods. The dominant ideology held by many teachers and devoted yoga practitioners is that yoga is a universal belief but not a religion. People from different religious beliefs can practice yoga and adhere to the philosophy. However, that is a more contemporary belief. A relationship between yoga and religion has existed for a very long time. There have been books written about it and it is constantly discussed in different yoga resources and websites. Older yoga texts may have a stronger tendency to support yoga as a religious tradition, but it is not the focus of this thesis to discuss in detail the link between yoga and religion.

<sup>59</sup> As mentioned before at footnote 59, *kirtan* is a form of singing *mantra*.

## Yoga, Spirituality, and Progression

As we have been discussing, while most yoga consumers do yoga on a physical level, a small group have moved from the bodily to the spiritual level in yoga. Some of these yoga practitioners believe that bodily yoga is just a tool for achieving the higher end of spirituality. Mandy, a devoted yoga practitioner who reads yoga books on philosophy and postures and goes to yoga classes every day, said, “ ‘Feel Yoga’ has been open for a year now since June 2006; it is about time to have more meditation classes for people... I’ve been telling the teachers this. They (the other members at the club) should start to learn more about spiritual yoga.” Although it is stated in the eight limbs of yoga that people may progress to a spiritual path from physical yoga, the fact is that not many yoga students have moved in that direction. However, for Mandy to make such expectations on the studio and her fellow students can be seen as an effort to differentiate herself and her club from other yoga practitioners who do not know much about the path of yoga, and to show that she knows better.

Indeed, teachers sometimes make an effort to bring advanced physical yoga and long-term yoga practitioners to a spiritual level, although the endeavor may not be particularly clear. In a high-level class in a local studio, when students were engaging in a challenging pose, Cindy, the teacher, told the class, “Don’t force it! You’re already in level 3, you should know that yoga is not just about doing the pose correctly!” After the class, Anthony, a yoga student for two years, who has been following Cindy, told me he did not understand what she meant. “If yoga is not about the postures, what is it about? I am confused because she’s never really explained what lies beyond the postures,” he said. Although students may not understand what lies beyond the body, the teacher’s suggestive comment is an attempt to relate physical yoga, especially at the more advanced level, to something beyond the body. Two teachers at separate studios have told me that they do not



chant “*om*” at the beginners’ class but do it at the more advanced classes, for fear of scaring away beginners who do not know much about yoga. This also shows that more advanced physical yoga is often more than being purely focused on bodily practice but carries spiritual associations. However, Cindy’s refusal to go into depth about what lies beyond the postures points out a dilemma in yoga. Although the teacher may want to talk more about spirituality or things that lie beyond physical yoga, this studio, which targets the local middle class, prohibits teachers from talking about spirituality or chanting more than the most basic “*om*” in class, as I was told by one of the teachers in the studio. The company that runs the center, which is a fitness chain, is afraid that this would scare away customers. A similar strategy is applied in the Indian studio I have been to, where teachers are not allowed to talk much about spirituality, and they are quick to assert that yoga is not a religion, for fear that it would hamper business.

This discontinuity between body and spirituality can be analyzed in terms of status representation. Both of the centers mentioned above target a local middle class audience. Although the teacher wanted to lift the practice to a more spiritual level, there is a barrier in introducing spirituality to students for fear that they might not accept it, and perhaps abandon yoga. Therefore spirituality is often kept at the level of hinting, with nothing concrete said. However, a different scenario exists in more upscale studios or independent yoga studios targeting Westerners. In these studios, spirituality is put out quite candidly. One of the more obvious ways to see this is the presence of altars with statues of gods. “Yoga Inn”, a medium-scale yoga center, has images of Ganesh, Buddha, Shiva, Hanuman, and Krishna on its walls. Also, there is an altar with statues of Buddha in a prayer position beside some candles inside the studio. At the Central branch of upscale studio, “Yoga Sanctuary”, there are wooden statues of various Indian gods at the front of the studio. It seems that spirituality is directly correlated with social class: generally the more expensive

the studio, the more there can be spiritual elements. At the same time, these studios also tend to attract a larger Western population, and a more international group of students compared to the cheaper studios. The Central branch of “Yoga Sanctuary” and the hotel where Eva practices, as we will see later in this chapter, are amongst the most expensive studios in Hong Kong and are good examples of this. It is no coincidence that the Western population in Hong Kong tends to be wealthier. Westerners in Hong Kong are often skilled professionals who have been sent to work in multinational companies in managerial positions. Thus they tend to be fairly well-off and educated.

Despite the presence of such spiritual elements such as images and statues of gods in the more expensive and Western studios, spirituality is not made entirely overt. Rather than saying their classes are spiritual, it is more suitable to say that the statues are there to create a yogic atmosphere; their presence acts as a decor to bring a tint of exoticism and possibly spirituality. Often, the spiritual elements such as statues and chants are not explained or discussed in class. Thus we can perhaps say that in the more upscale studios, the management and teachers are better at playing with spirituality. But the yoga is not necessarily more spiritual.

*Although we have seen how spiritual yoga practitioners try to portray an image that they are not concerned about the body, body and spirituality are not necessarily in opposition. They can enhance each other, as we will see in the following section.*

### **Body vs. Spirituality**

According to the yoga scriptures, there is no contradiction between body and spirituality; instead, the two complement each other. Through practicing physical yoga, one should be able to master his/her own body, thus gain a better control of him/herself. Control of the body is a way to lead to control of the mind, making way for spiritual enlightenment.



However, in Hong Kong, we find a contradiction between body and spirituality, because most people focus on the physical side of yoga and have no awareness of the existence of yoga philosophies. Spiritual yoga seems to go beyond the external material body. However, as we will now discuss, the line between body and spirituality is actually not that clear-cut. The two are in a heavily intertwined relationship, which I will now elaborate.

### *Body as Prerequisite for Spirituality*

As discussed in the previous chapter, a slim body is a middle-class ideal and bodily capital. However, its significance goes beyond that. On top of being a source of capital itself, a slender body seems to be a necessary condition for gaining authority to discuss yoga philosophy and be respected in the Hong Kong context.

The example of Melissa, a student in a yoga teacher's training program, illustrates this very well. She commented on the instructor who gave the lesson on yoga philosophies:

(she is so fat)... and she explained that she herself didn't begin her yoga path with the *asanas* (physical postures). She spent the whole two-hour class talking about 'yoga is happiness'. But she is just talking out loud, there is no justification really, and I don't buy that.

Melissa's view makes it very clear that spiritual talk does not seem to be grounded without a fit body. The view of Cecilia, in her mid-fifties, and a part-time yoga teacher, echoes Melissa's view. On her own liking of yoga teachers, Cecilia commented:

there is a Westerner, with a 'tire' around the waist area. She is so fat and clumsy. I just don't want to go to her class. The teachers' body shape has a major impact on the students' confidence in how effective the class is. Teachers do not have to be very slim but they can't have a fat tummy, at the very least.

She previously said that all her students just want to get a slim body like hers. This matches Skeggs' (1997) comments that investment in bodily capital makes more sense when other capital such as education is limited and not very much. Cecilia, who has received only primary education and has a strong and sole focus on the body in yoga, seems to illustrate

this. Although she came from a working-class background, her economic situation has improved since her daughter got married. That spares her more time to train her body, and to use her newly-fit body as a capital to teach yoga and dance in order to make money.

Although according to the *Yoga Sutras*, it is possible to begin the yoga path by studying yoga philosophy, in Hong Kong most yoga practitioners approach bodily yoga first. They start out doing physical yoga, and most often it is only after they have successfully gained the desired slender body that they go into yoga philosophy. Rarely do yoga practitioners go into the philosophy without engaging in physical yoga first; and if they do not look like good physical models, as we have seen in Melissa's comment, it may not be well-received.

Aside from going extensively into the yoga philosophy, there are also other ways to show the progression from physical to spiritual yoga. Practicing vegetarianism is one of the more overt ways.

### *Vegetarianism*

In *ashtanga* yoga, as stated in the *Yoga Sutras*, the first limb—*yama*—means abstinence. The first part of *yama* includes *ahimsa*, meaning non-violence or non-injury ([1990]1978: 28). Thus not eating meat is an obvious way to spare other beings' lives. However, I have also heard more practical/selfish reasons for yoga practitioners being vegetarian: as animals excrete toxins into their bodies when they are slaughtered, eating meat from these animals could make the body stiff, which is particularly unfavorable if one wants to do well in yoga poses. On top of such reasoning, some yoga practitioners say that they simply cut down on meat following what their bodies tell them. Many of them have told me that their desire for meat dropped after they began yoga, and thus they are eating much less meat now. Although we cannot probe into how convincing these rationales may



be, we can see that there are various reasons for becoming vegetarian.

Becoming a vegetarian is one of the most obvious ways to declare that one is a “serious” yoga practitioner. Kate, in between the two times we corresponded, which was two months apart, told me she had turned vegetarian for health reasons. Since then, she has noticed “a change in how calm my mind is, especially with regard to meditation. My energy levels are also off the charts, I’m loving it. Surprisingly, there are no negative effects on body weight or mass.” She sees positive effects of vegetarianism in terms of the stillness of her mind and rise in energy level, instead of talking about her body getting slimmer, which seems to be the reason why some women turn vegetarian. (Indeed, she already has a stick-like figure, as she describes her body, and had voiced worries previously that turning vegetarian may hamper her health.) It was clear that she has become vegetarian not to become slender, nor perhaps for physical reasons alone.

The case of Linda, a personal fitness trainer in her late 20s illustrates this very well. She comes to yoga class every day wearing heavy smoky-eyed makeup, a black *Nike* bra top and long yoga pants. She brings her own mat to class, and sits at the same place at the front row facing the mirror every time. She also brings in a large bottle of *Evian* water for class. She is good at the postures and told me she is often mistaken as a vegetarian by members in the yoga studio. Instead of a spiritual practice, Linda treats yoga as a breathing and stretching exercise that aids her daily workout, which includes an hour of jogging and an hour of weight training in the gym. She does not read yoga philosophy, but feels that yoga helps calm her mind. She believes that people tend to assume that someone who is fit, good at physical yoga and frequents the yoga studio would be a “serious”/spiritual practitioner, and thus a vegetarian. This is not to suggest that she is not serious about yoga; indeed, she gives much time and effort to yoga, but takes it as an exercise that enhances her workout but does not go into the spiritual level. The other members in the studio make an

association between physical and spiritual yoga. Very often, vegetarianism is the point to mark a spiritual practitioner from someone who only focus on physical yoga.

Although vegetarianism carries symbolic meaning to publicly mark one a serious spiritual practitioner of yoga, this is not always the case, as forgoing meat is also a strategy employed by some women to lose weight. Indeed, cutting off meat can be an effective way to reduce protein intake, which consequently prevents people from building excessive muscles from vigorous physical yoga. Thus a lean, well-toned body may be the result, instead of a bulky body or excessive muscles. Therefore, becoming a vegetarian could also be little more than a tactic to get a lean body, although perhaps justified and claimed to be due to the connection to the universal spirit and respect for all lives.

Linda, Kate and Caroline are similar in many respects, such as being young and beautiful, good at physical yoga, and spending much time with Westerners. However, Linda is different from Kate and Caroline because she has not followed the spiritual yoga path. Indeed, traces can be found of her “not-too-upper-middle-classness”. Her English is fluent but not perfect, at times punctuated by a local Hong Kong accent. Unlike Kate and Caroline, Linda studied at a local university rather than a foreign university, and has worked as a flight attendant. This sheds light on her class and status representation, as we will later discuss.

Linda’s case is interesting due to the link yoga practitioners assert between physical and spiritual yoga—adhering to the yoga philosophy and maintaining that physical yoga is a tool for reaching spiritual yoga. Her case shows that many yoga practitioners know the linkage, and are aware that serious yoga practitioners are vegetarians, although they do not often understand the reasoning, which can be multi-faceted. Another illustration of this is that yoga practitioners make a correlation between a vegetarian diet and the standard of the teacher. Regina, who has been doing yoga for many years, commented on the teacher she



has had before. “I started learning yoga a long time ago, taught by a local teacher. He was not very good; you see, he was not even a vegetarian...” Linda, as we saw, by not taking on vegetarianism, is a refusal that may lower her credibility as a teacher of physical yoga.

Some teachers are vegans, who forgo all animal products, such as eggs, milk, and dairy products, because they feel that these farmed animals are treated cruelly, and thus that eating such products is also imposing violence, which is not abiding by *ahimsa*, non-violence. Eva, a part-time yoga teacher from England we saw before, who is a lecturer at a professional institute, told me this. Aside from abiding by the interpretation of the *Sutras*, she takes pride at the fact that she is ethical and has concerns about the world. Shirley, already a vegetarian who does not eat eggs, decided to give up taking milk altogether after hearing a talk at the “Evolution Asia Yoga Conference” on how farm animals are treated cruelly for the sake of gathering milk and eggs for human consumption. She was raised in England, and has just quit her job at a local university to become a full-time yoga practitioner.

Some yoga practitioners even go further and believe that they should not eat onions and garlic because these food arouse unwanted desires so the mind cannot stay pure and calm. This group also usually forbids the intake of caffeine. This is taken up by a very small group of yoga practitioners, usually only those who treat yoga as part of their religious belief, for example, those practitioners from Hare Krishna and Raja Yoga. Aside from those groups, there are very few yoga practitioners who follow such a restricted diet.

The logic of distinction concerning diet seems to be this: the more food is restricted, the more respect can be garnered. Expanding that logic to the lifestyle of yoga practitioners, one can say that the more the discipline practiced, the more the respect and distinction earned. However, this is an intricate matter. Spiritual yoga practitioners gain a wide spectrum of distinction, but people who take yoga as part of their religious practice, who

lead a largely similar lifestyle but follow stricter principles, do not enjoy much recognition at all by yoga practitioners. This will be discussed in greater detail in the coming sections.

Now we will look at how a large number of spiritual yoga practitioners exert a strong control over their bodies, despite denying this, resulting in what I would call a fetishism of the body, just like the purely physical practitioners, although they present an image that they are not engaged in this.

### *Fetishism of the Body*

Although spiritual yoga practitioners present the image that they have transcended their bodies, many of them actually do this through bodily means, by disciplining the body to achieve spirituality. This is done through forbidding desires, by becoming vegetarians, and by engaging in daily physical yoga practice. Because a fit body is a guaranteed result of their strenuous physical practice, their not talking about the slimming effects of yoga may be leaving out the obvious. In a way, they are thus engaged in another form of fetishism of the body.

### **Disciplining the Body**

Looking at the example of Eva, we can better understand how spiritual yoga practitioners control their bodies. Eva, who does an extreme form of yoga called Mysore style, practices every morning from 6.30a.m. for two-and-a-half hours. She reads much on yoga philosophy and is fluent in the Sanskrit names of yoga postures and considers herself a serious yoga practitioner on a spiritual path.

Like many other practitioners, Eva said that her body has become highly sensitive after starting yoga. She became a vegetarian immediately after she picked up her current style of yoga because her body told her to do so, she said. She has also dropped her coffee and tea drinking habit, and stopped wearing perfume three weeks later, because her body



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has become too sensitive for it, which she attributes to her yoga practice. As a result of her demanding yoga practice, she has a strict lifestyle:

My friends and I rarely go to parties. If I do go, it is only on Friday nights, because we don't need to practice early on Saturdays. I usually go to bed at 10 every night because given the practice in the morning; I am totally exhausted by that time. At these parties, everyone starts leaving and going home at nine. People rarely drink. If I do drink, it is only a glass of champagne. The best is to only take only half a glass. If I take the whole glass, then I will feel it in the next day's practice. I can feel that in my breath... It's awful. It is just not worth it.

Because of the physical yoga practice, she is leading a fairly ascetic lifestyle by going to bed early and minimizing the intake of alcohol. Needless to say, she is a vegetarian and does not take any animal product such as milk and eggs, not just because her body "told her" but also because "it is causing pain to the animal for the sake of getting those products. I don't feel the need to eat it." Her lifestyle and diet are all a result of exerting control over her body.

Eva knows yoga philosophy to a point where she even knows about the different translations of the *Yoga Sutras* and how difficult to read they are compared to each other. Given her vast knowledge of yoga philosophy, I would expect that she spends a significant proportion of time training herself on a spiritual level, for example, in meditation. Indeed, she does practice meditation every morning. However, she spends very little time at it, especially compared to the length of time she spends in physical yoga. She explained that now that she has mastered the trick of meditation—which is to make the mind not think about anything—she could reach that state within three breaths. Thus she only spares ten minutes meditating every morning. However, she spends half an hour on headstand and then two and a half hours in an extremely physical class every morning. The proportion is extremely tilted, given that she knows everything about yoga philosophy. She is frank to admit that her main purpose for doing yoga is for health; however, three hours of daily exercises to maintain bodily health is extreme by most standards, as most authorities

usually recommend around half an hour exercise per day for health effects. Precisely because she thinks yoga is about improving health, this shows spirituality as distinction. If she were purely doing yoga for health reasons, there is really no need to know about the philosophy at all. It is important not to forget that she is a lecturer herself and is pursuing a Ph.D. degree; thus the search into spirituality may well suit her curious mind, and perhaps as well, her desire to exhibit her prestige among the group of physical yoga practitioners.

Yoga practitioners who go into spirituality generally do not comment on each others' bodies. One reason for this is that it is almost inevitable that they get a fit body from the regular physical yoga practice. Eva recalled that three months after surgery—which stopped her from doing yoga—she still had her “six-pack” abdominal muscles, usually reserved for very fit men who work out a lot; very rarely do women have this, unless they are very well trained athletes. This may be an extreme case, but nevertheless it allows us to understand how the net effect of what the spiritual practitioners do actually works equally, if not more intensely on their bodies, as they spend a substantial amount of time engaging in extremely demanding physical exercises. Eva reads yoga philosophy and refers to herself as a yogi in her email name, which is a way to say that she is a serious practitioner of yoga and practices it for spiritual reasons. She also comments on teachers who do not know much about yoga philosophy, saying how she and the other yoga practitioners/teachers who are familiar with the philosophy of yoga treat those teachers as a joke.

Spiritual yoga practitioners may engage in very difficult postures. Eva shared with me her experience, that a “headstand is my favorite pose, I love being upside down. I did it for 45 minutes this morning. Then I did a half headstand for another 30 minutes. The more advanced pose is to lift the head from the floor and to look at the ceiling,” she told me. She is optimistic that she will progress to the next level in a few months. Challenging herself to achieve extreme poses, on top of controlling diet, and the strict and almost ascetic lifestyle



she leads, shows that although she does not mention bodily beauty when she does yoga, she does fetishize the body, just as the physical yoga practitioners do. She may have probed a bit more deeply into the spiritual self, but she is far from having gone beyond the physical body.

Although earlier I agreed with Skeggs' (1997) analysis that people with less education are more likely to engage heavily in investing on their bodies, after a careful analysis of how spiritual practitioners treat their bodies, Skeggs' statement seems a little inaccurate when applied to yoga in Hong Kong. The working class is not engaged in body sculpting through yoga in Hong Kong, and they do not seem to engage much in their bodies using other means either. It is the middle and upper-middle class who are doing that. Although members of the upper-middle class are not concerned about their bodies on the surface level, deep down, they are putting much effort into perfecting their bodies; it is just that they use spiritual claims to veil their physical efforts. Of course they claim not to be concerned about their bodies, but their behavior seems to show that indeed they are.

In Hong Kong, there are only two places offering the strenuous Mysore style yoga which Eva practices, either at one of the most expensive hotels or at the most upscale and revered studio chain. This shows that this particularly strenuous style of yoga is in itself a form of distinction. It is in effect a perfect combination that the yoga, with a direct lineage from Pattabi Jois, a great yoga master, and demanding extreme discipline, becomes a distinctive style of yoga which is offered in the most prestigious studios.

### *Fat yoga teachers*

Although most spiritual yoga practitioners, and teachers, have a very fit physique, there are some exceptional cases. It seems that even yoga practitioners on a spiritual path, like Eva, are engaged in fetishism of the body although they are also following yoga

spirituality. If this is the case, then fat yoga teachers may be among the few who have in a way transcended the fetishism of the body. Their bodies may be a demonstration that they understand the “true meaning” of yoga, that yoga is not ultimately about the body but spirituality. These fat yoga teachers could be seen to have chosen to bypass the strenuous physical practice because they have apparently understood the essence of yoga philosophy, and decided to allocate more time to engaging the mind for spiritual enlightenment. Therefore their bodies are not as fit as those of other yoga teachers or practitioners. However, I have met very few teachers like that over the course of my fieldwork. Most of them do not receive much respect and recognition from students, as we can see from Cecilia and Melissa’s statement we earlier considered. After all, most practitioners are pursuing yoga as a physical exercise. The nice body of the teacher is in a sense a guarantee that yoga “works,” and it is a bonus to be able to look at the beautiful bodies of the teachers, as some informants have told me. Of all the teachers I have met, I have only encountered Western female teachers who do not have such standard slim “yogic bodies”. There is one such teacher I have met who managed to gain the confidence of students through her fluency with posture names in Sanskrit and knowledge of philosophy. However, the yoga she teaches is as physical if not more strenuous, than the yoga taught in other studios. She is also a mother, which gives her a further excuse to not be obsessed with her figure, and this creates much rapport with other women in the class. Her classes take place in a Westerner-targeted studio, and the studio tries to position itself as being concerned with spirituality, and has no mirrors, which supposedly provides more leeway for the body figure of the teachers in that they do not necessarily need to be very slender. However, it has to be emphasized that a teacher without a fit slender body is far from the norm. Normally no teacher with more than a slender figure could “survive” in a local studio, as most of the students are there to learn physical yoga and the teachers’ bodies seems to be their most



important capital. It very much coincides with the case of aerobics instructors in Tokyo fitness clubs (Spielvogel 2003: 24).

Aside from the importance of the body as capital, I have found that Sanskrit is also an important indicator to show the knowledge of a yoga practitioner about yoga. We will discuss how Sanskrit is used to gain distinction in the next section.

### *Sanskritizing the Rituals*

On top of a slender body and vegetarian diet, I have found that many yoga practitioners who present themselves as being devoted to yoga adopt Sanskrit words when mentioning yoga postures and when discussing yoga philosophy. This displays distinction which is perhaps more than that of the body, but similar to that of understanding yoga philosophy and being fluent with it.

In a physical yoga class taught by Westerners, it is not uncommon for a teacher to give instruction like this,

Ok, from plank, move into *chaturanga dandasana* (low plank)... Excellent! Keep it there, hold for three breaths. Now go to *urdhva mukha svanasana* (upward-facing dog). Yes, beautiful! From there, go into *adho mukha svanasana* (downward-facing dog). Good. Don't forget to tighten your *mula bandha* (base lock) when you are in the pose.

This teacher has offered a good demonstration of her Sanskrit fluency in yoga terms, and regulars in the class usually know the terms from practice. Knowledge of Sanskrit is a credential for yoga teachers. One student who goes to two different centers told me that she is aware that the teacher at the local center is not eloquent in her use of the Sanskrit terms, thus casting doubts about her credentials. Many of the people in the devoted yoga community are fluent in the posture names in Sanskrit. Indeed, those names are highly effective as jargon to draw a boundary between insider and outsider.

The use of Sanskrit is essential for presenting an image that one is devoted to yoga. At

the panel discussion of the “Evolution Yoga Conference”, world famous teachers show that they can quote freely from the Sanskrit phrases from the *Yoga Sutras* to justify their arguments. Knowledge of Sanskrit is a very important form of prestige, especially for those high up in the yoga hierarchy. However, Sanskrit is not easy to adopt. After going to yoga classes for more than a year, I still have problems remembering the names of yoga postures in Sanskrit. Most of the time I have to steal a peek from students around me to know which pose the teacher is referring to. Usually, one must be familiar with the English alphabet to find Sanskrit approachable because of their similarity in terms of pronunciation. Thus fluency in Sanskrit is usually limited to individuals with a good command of English. As we have discussed before, there is a language hierarchy linked to class, from Cantonese to English to Sanskrit when saying the name of the yoga postures. Knowledge of Sanskrit is limited to a very small group of people, especially when it is beyond the level of yoga posture names and into the vocabularies related to philosophy. Only people who are totally immersed in yoga philosophy would make the effort to learn the language to better understand yoga scriptures (it is like theologians learning Hebrew for the sake of better understanding the Bible). Knowledge of Sanskrit, applied to yoga philosophy, is the most valuable form of knowledge and stands at the top of the distinction hierarchy as a yoga practitioner.

Aside from spiritual yoga practitioners, the religious yoga practitioners are generally also fluent in Sanskrit and perhaps represent a more extreme form of yoga philosophy. However, their social standing is very different, as we will see in the next section.

### *Religious Yoga*

Very similar to the spiritual yoga practitioners is a more steadfast group of people who treat yoga as part of a religious practice. They abide by a lifestyle that is similar but more



austere than that of the spiritual yoga practitioners. People in these religious yoga groups do not necessarily participate in physical yoga, but some avid practitioners of physical yoga belong to these groups and consider it a step further than the spiritual yoga I discussed above. The religious group acts as a good comparison with the spiritual practitioners.

Although these religious organizations may not be directly linked to physical yoga, their teachings have a degree of similarity with yoga philosophy and they are often keen in aligning with physical yoga to attract more followers. A number of devoted physical/spiritual yoga practitioners do engage in these religious groups to different extents. One example is David Swenson, one of the most famous *ashtanga*<sup>60</sup> teachers in the world. He used to be a devotee of the Hare Krishnas and helped set up the Hare Krishna temple in Hong Kong, located in Ho Man Tin, twenty years ago but later left the group. Sravaniya de Pecoraro, one of the first Western teachers in Hong Kong, who has since left to go back to the U.S., was also once part of the Hare Krishnas, as are several of the yoga teachers around the city today. In light of our earlier argument about the respect for discipline, these religious yoga practitioners may gain much credit for their religious devotion and the strict rules they follow. However, in fact they receive little recognition outside their religious group because they are considered too extreme, and mystical by the majority of yoga practitioners.

I have found two yoga-related religious groups in Hong Kong: the Hare Krishna Movement and Raja Yoga. Both groups have strict rules such as vegetarianism, abstinence from sex deemed illicit<sup>61</sup>, no gambling, and no intake of stimulants such as coffee and garlic. Without going into detail, both groups require strict religious practice. They require their believers to practice meditation and chant in the early morning and engage in daily

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<sup>60</sup> *Ashtanga* yoga, on top of meaning the eight limbs of yoga, is also a style of yoga. In its present day manifestation in Hong Kong, it usually involves a very fast flow of yoga postures and many sets of sun salutations.

<sup>61</sup> On top of forbidding sex outside of marriage, they also prohibit sex within marriage as they consider sex other than for the purpose of procreation illicit.

prayer or meditation several times during the day. Both groups believe there is a higher being and that they must forgo worldly indulgence to get closer to god: Krishna or Baba in the two groups. Very often, followers have a fairly secluded social life, which is largely limited to within the religious group. Susanna, a Hong Kong Chinese with a pierced tongue, who wears fake eyelashes and colored contact lenses, has recently found her faith in Hare Krishna. She has had an interest in yoga philosophy for a few years, but only recently did she find her faith in Krishna. She has been going to the Hare Krishna temple every day for several months. She now spends the majority of her time with the devotees of the movement. "I listen to Krishna's music, but no longer to pop music. Instead of reading magazines, I only read books related to Krishna. When I go online, I visit sites where I communicate with fellow believers of Krishna," she contended. She told me,

Spirituality is higher and more important than the body. (Physical) yoga is very enticing at the beginning as it gives you a beautiful body, but it is just a little treat. There was much ego, and pride, and I thought about the body a lot ...but the ultimate aim of yoga is to give up your body.

Susanna is referring to those yoga practitioners who study the philosophy but still enjoy worldly desires such as eating out in good restaurants and discussing yoga philosophy over wine (which is what she used to do). This situation is akin to that of Kate and Caroline as we earlier discussed. She continued, "(After getting to know Krishna...) now I have no desire and expectations, everything is spiritual. I hope to be detached from the material world one day." Susanna teaches part-time at the Indian studio and is a full-time spa and facial therapist at a five-star hotel in Hong Kong. She wore her devotee necklace and prayer beads bag when she was at the studio. She lived in America when she was young and went to a top English girls' school in Hong Kong. She received two years of university education before quitting to go into the beauty industry.

As Susanna teaches in an Indian studio, there is a larger leeway compared to local studios in allowing her to be open about yoga-related religious matters, although even



teachers there are quick to assert that yoga is not a religion. But studios have different policies towards spirituality. Cindy, the head teacher of a local studio, although not a strict follower of Krishna, also believes in it. But she does not publicize it for fear of impairing her image. “Krishna is the ultimate god of love, he is the most beautiful being. Krishna is the ultimate god of yoga.... I don’t tell my students about it because they may not be able to understand,” she said.

### *Spiritual vs. Religious Followers*

Although people who follow a spiritual path and those who consider yoga part of their religious practice appear highly similar on the surface, they lead very different lives, and the distinction they gather in society also differs. Spiritual yoga practitioners receive much prestige while religious practitioners gain little respect. This seems due to two reasons. First, this could be caused by religious practitioners not having a fit and “yogic” body that is so much admired and talked about, as most of them do not engage in the daily practice of vigorous physical yoga. Second, those who take on the spiritual path have less constraint in life than those who are on the religious path, and are freer to enjoy much worldly indulgence, which is restricted for the religious practitioners. Take the example of Eva, who despite claiming to be a spiritual practitioner, can still attend parties, go to nice restaurants and enjoy drinks and good food. Although her enjoyment and lifestyle is partially restricted, it is still filled with enjoyment, by practicing in a five-star hotel and drinking the finest champagne. However, alcohol and enjoyment are largely banished by religious yoga groups. After all, yoga is a great source for gaining bodily as well as intellectual capital, and the distinction gained from yoga is not only limited to the yoga community but is valid in the wider social world, as can be seen in spiritual practitioners.

People who are on the spiritual path do not necessarily take up all the components of

spiritual yoga. Quite a few of my informants who have knowledge of yoga philosophy and go to physical yoga classes everyday are not vegetarians. Although this may not grant them much distinction in front of those who follow a strict vegetarian diet and know yoga philosophy, the distinction is only relative. Knowing about yoga philosophy and details of postures in itself is enough to distinguish them from most yoga participants, who only go to classes and have no understanding of yoga as a philosophical system. These yoga practitioners can pick and choose to follow some discipline required in spiritual yoga practice and lead a lifestyle with much indulgence and freedom as well, if they choose. On the contrary, those who do yoga as part of their religious practice face much restriction in life; they have to basically withdraw from much of the social world and devote a great amount of their time to the religious community. Thus the religious capital they get has little validity in the wider world.

Interestingly, the strategies of going into spirituality by yoga practitioners in Hong Kong are similar to the techniques employed by people trying to gain distinction in the caste system in India. Let me now briefly illustrate the parallels between them.

### **Distinction and Class Analysis**

Among yoga practitioners, it seems that the various strategies used to gain distinction are akin to what people use in the caste system in India to claim social status, especially for those in the middle range of the caste system. These Indians adopt vegetarianism and Sanskrit, both attributes of Brahmins, the highest caste among the classification system in India, into their daily life (Goffman 1990[1959]). By doing so, they bring much social status and distinction for themselves and hope to successfully rise in how people perceive their caste. I have found that the duties Brahmins are supposed to fulfill are similar to that dictated by yoga philosophy, such as control of emotions and senses, making the pursuit of



yoga and imitation of Brahmins' behavior interesting parallels for the pursuit of distinction.

According to Goffman (1990[1959]: 46), the caste system is not as strict as it seems and movement within the caste system is possible. Thus, some people present themselves to have come from a higher position than they really have “by adopting vegetarianism, teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing...ritual and pantheon.” In other words, they are taking over customs and rites of the Brahmins although it is forbidden (Goffman 1990[1959]: 46). Many of these are done in the practice of yoga, as a significant portion of spiritual practitioners adopt Sanskrit, vegetarianism and sometimes minimize their amount of alcohol intake. Compared to the restricted “caste mobility” in India; the social class situation in Hong Kong is more volatile, as discussed in the opening chapter. There are hidden rules but no clear restrictions on how each class should behave; and no clear class boundary exists. Thus people have a strong inclination to adopt strategies to appear that they are from a good class background. Adopting the spiritual practice of yoga, which is a more advanced form of distinction, largely coincides with the practices of the Brahmins, the highest caste in India.

### *Yoga, Distinction, and Knowledge Capital*

Knowledge capital, exhibited through fluency in Sanskrit terms, yoga postures and quoting from yoga philosophy is a good way to differentiate oneself from other practitioners. This is true to Lamont's noting that the solid upper-middle class in the United States define their class culture partially by the fact that they never “draw socioeconomic boundaries on the basis of wealth” (Lamont 1992: 171). This is true for the yoga practitioners I interviewed as well; instead of focusing on wealth, they use more indirect means. One example of this is through exhibiting their knowledge capital by acquiring yoga philosophy and using abstract concepts to describe their experience in yoga. From

what I have found, the practice of spiritual yoga is more often substantiated by a high education background than money. However, this does not go against Lamont's point that exhibiting wealth in indirect form allows one to display social status most effectively as a fair number of the spiritual practitioners I have met are from a wealthy background. I have found that education, especially that obtained in the West, is a strong determining factor in one's inclination towards spiritual yoga. Instead of discussing the broad concept of cultural capital, I argue that "knowledge capital," which I introduce as a specific kind of cultural capital requiring much academic training and knowledge, is particularly relevant for the current situation in Hong Kong. As a larger number of people are getting rich, conspicuous consumption is not as effective as it once was for displaying distinction. This is especially true for the middle and upper-middle classes, who may not have a huge amount of money to spend, but are differentiated from the working class through their higher education and lifestyle. One way they manifest their distinction is through the practice of spiritual yoga. Earlier research has suggested that money is the strongest indicator of one's class in Hong Kong, but money alone is no longer sufficient as the indicator of social class and status as many people have entered the middle class. Increasingly how one consumes is the closest indicator to show one's class standing as social class becomes more ambiguous a concept. Status representation and distinction assume increasing significance. Here is how knowledge capital, closely associated with education, becomes increasingly important to appear to come from a good class and distinct from other people.

In *Consuming Hong Kong*, a major book discussing consumption and status in Hong Kong, Mathews and Lui argued that "unlike Bourdieu's France, distinction as linked to cultural capital has little tie to social class in Hong Kong" (2001: 9). However, Hong Kong status distinctions have evolved much since the book was published seven years ago. Having money is not enough for distinction nowadays because there are more people with



money, and thus more indirect and complicated means are needed to achieve distinction, for example, through wine consumption (Siu 2008). Thus cultural capital, like knowledge of yoga philosophy is a good way for individuals to draw distinction between themselves and others.

Although we have been looking at the importance of knowledge, or cultural capital in bringing distinction, what I have found in yoga in Hong Kong is that such capital in itself is not enough to create a direct tie to social class, unlike what Bourdieu described about France. In Hong Kong, a mediator is required, as we see in the case of yoga. A slim body is the mediator to bridge knowledge capital with status representation, and this is not only true for yoga. Recently a friend of mine who has just entered an investment consulting firm was told by her boss to lose weight in order to look more professional and thus appear more convincing to clients. She is far from being fat but is just not stick-thin, like so many Hong Kong women. This implies that the value of the slender body as a representation of discipline, just as small feet did in China about a hundred years ago (Anagnost 1989), transcends the arena of yoga but has larger significance in society. From what we have seen, a fit body is the prerequisite to be taken seriously as an authority for discussion on spiritual yoga, or knowledge. People usually proceed from physical yoga to spiritual yoga in an accumulative fashion; going through physical yoga and attaining a slim beautiful body is often used to legitimize spiritual yoga as a form of capital. Possession of both bodily and knowledge capital gains the most distinction in the end. This is not necessarily true in all areas of life in Hong Kong, but this principle does transcend yoga and has a degree of truth in other facets of life.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has looked at how people present themselves as going beyond the body in

yoga to attain distinction. Most spiritual yoga practitioners display an image that they are not concerned about the body. Their tendency to be fluent in Sanskrit terms of yoga, knowledge of yoga philosophy, and vegetarian diet, marks them as distinct from other yoga practitioners. However, they are also deeply involved in training the body through yoga, and I suggest that another form of fetishism of the body exists for these spiritual yoga practitioners. Some of these people, as we saw, do indeed treat the body as a holy entity that must be kept sacred/intact at all times. They have a tendency to do this by practicing vegetarianism, through constant and vigorous physical practice, and sometimes teetotalism—abstinence from alcohol. Although spiritual yoga practitioners do not talk overtly about their bodies, the net effect of what they do is just as focused if not more focused on the body compared to those who openly claim they do physical yoga. For example, engaging in vegetarianism and spending three hours in exercise every day is making of the body something that it is not. Thus they are engaged in another form of fetishism of the body. Only when there is not a focus on the body so much of the time can we argue that there is a non-fetishism of the body. Indeed, in this sense, fat yoga teachers may be the only people who are not fetishizing the body and are engaging in a non-fetishized form of yoga.

Efforts by spiritual practitioners, I argue, constitute part of “knowledge capital,” a new kind of cultural capital, requiring and showing the person’s education level. In the end, such acts of displaying “knowledge capital” go into showing one’s social status, whether those who show such status are fully aware of it or not. Meanwhile, a slender body—or bodily capital—acts as a mediator between knowledge capital and money to make knowledge capital able to serve as a valid indicator of one’s class position. Without the slender body, one faces much difficulty in gaining recognition for one’s knowledge of yoga philosophy. Although spiritual yoga seems to have transcended the body, it is rigidly built



on the foundation of a finely trained body. A hierarchy of distinction—from body, vegetarianism, philosophy, and finally knowledge of Sanskrit, reveals various degrees of distinction. The more basic bodily level of distinction is required to make the upper levels of distinction fully valid.

However, although religious yoga practitioners lead a lifestyle largely similar to that of spiritual practitioners, they do not gain much distinction as their audience is limited, and they are socially secluded and are considered too extreme to gain the distinction that their discipline logically might warrant.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion: the Significance of Yoga as Distinction in Hong Kong**

In Hong Kong, yoga is a physical craze and a fitness fad: many people talk about the slimming effects of yoga. Yoga has become a form of distinction in Hong Kong, through different strategies involving body and spirituality. After discussing the various aspects of yoga in the previous chapters, this concluding chapter aims at setting forth once again the

major ideas in the thesis and further explaining the value of body and spirituality in this society. In the first part of this conclusion, I will make a brief summary of the earlier chapters, highlighting the main points running through this thesis. The second part of the chapter aims at extending my findings to discuss the larger significance of this thesis. Before going into the summary of the previous chapters, I will discuss the limitation of this thesis.

### **Limitation**

Although I have spent the entire thesis discussing how yoga is used as a tool for gaining social status through becoming slim and going into spirituality, not everyone is doing yoga for the pursuit of distinction. Indeed, most of the people who do spiritual yoga engage in it for multiple personal reasons. However, according to Bourdieu, people are pursuing distinction even when they are not aware of it. “The habitus is a spontaneity without consciousness or will” (1990b: 56), and habitus is the mechanism which produce and define social distinction. Thus yoga practitioners may not consciously think that being able to recite Patanjali makes them more attractive or more sophisticated, but it is clearly one factor to explain why so many people are engaged in yoga but not other activities which do not carry much distinction. Distinction is not everything, but it is very real and present.

Although I argue that pursuing distinction through yoga is one of the major reasons for people to engage in yoga, there are many other reasons, and I do not discount them, e.g. for health, for making friends, and or purely for feeling good. Many people have told me about a sense of relaxation and comfort after yoga, a “really good feeling” that is beyond their description and cannot be clearly put into words. This feeling in itself could be a major reason driving people to engage in yoga, without considering the long-term prospects of



becoming healthier or displaying social status. This is a constraint of this thesis since I cannot fully probe into the internal experience of these people to analyze how it changes their attitude towards yoga. This limitation is also expressed by Bourdieu: “there are many things we understand only with our bodies, on this side of consciousness, without having the words to say them” (1988: 81). However, since the pursuit of distinction is there even without us realizing it, I believe it exists for most yoga participants, and thus it is not a major hindering factor for this thesis.

### **Summary of Chapters**

In this section, I will discuss the major themes arising in this thesis. I will discuss them under several themes: globalization, leisure and discipline, yoga and status, and capital transference. Before doing that, I will first recap the arguments in previous chapters.

The historical development of yoga in Hong Kong shows that yoga has been brought in by Indians and by Westerners. Indians used to teach a small number of local people in the 1950s, and a small number of these teachers gradually came to teach in local centers requiring only inexpensive fees. Westerners started teaching a different style of yoga in Hong Kong in the late 1990s. However yoga did not become hugely popular until mega studios operating under fitness centers began opening in 2002.

Yoga is unique in Hong Kong, in that the massive scale and luxurious studios are optimal sites for displaying conspicuous leisure. These are places with a careful balance between leisure and discipline, which is an effort to entice customers. Using the verb “play” to describe the act of engaging in yoga is unique to Hong Kong and shows how studios try to create a feeling that yoga is for fun and that most people are more than happy to take on this loose approach. However, ultimately, it is the discipline veiled under leisure which gains the most distinction; yoga customers are attracted to the relaxed atmosphere, but

discipline for some wins out as the underlying distinction because it means serious practice, and by implication, that one is following a “real” yoga path. Thus it is widely respected.

The different attitudes people hold towards yoga are reflected in the verbs they use to describe the act of engaging in yoga. “Practice” is the most serious term, meaning it is a serious pursuit, thus gaining much merit. This is in distinction to “play”, or “do”. Different relationships exist between teachers and students, ranging from “instructor/member” to “master/student”. The relationship has major implication for the students’ attitudes towards yoga. The master is always an Indian male; Indian male teachers are most likely to play up their ethnicity and present a spiritual image. However, the yoga authority in Hong Kong lies in Western hands. Western teachers gain the most prestige and local teachers teaching in the Western style are also well-respected. In my analysis of English as the medium of instruction, I argue that what underlies this distinction is not so much ethnicity as the international image carried by these different teachers.

From the media and advertisements, it seems that the body lies at the very core of most people’s motivation for doing yoga in Hong Kong, echoing the extremely slim body ideal in Hong Kong. Physical yoga is the prime focus, and yoga philosophy is largely left out in the mainstream yoga studios. However, it is unclear how slimming as facilitated by yoga as an exercise really works, for scientific research have found that the calories burned by doing yoga are almost equal to those burned by going for a slow walk. Yoga practitioners’ fetishism of the body has implications going far beyond that of the aesthetics level. The fact that they have almost a sole focus on the body in yoga is not purely because they want to look beautiful, but that the body has important class connotations. As a slim body is a symbol of the middle class, many people do yoga in order to achieve such a body.

Yoga practitioners of different education levels and social classes have varied attitudes towards yoga, with the highly educated usually engaged in spiritual yoga while those with



less education and from a more working-class family background doing yoga for purely physical reasons. Although the highly educated yoga practitioners read yoga philosophy and may be fluent in Sanskrit terms for yoga postures, I have argued that they are actually involved in another form of fetishism of the body. They like to present themselves as not concerned about the body, but many of them are indeed working on the body more than those who see yoga purely as an exercise. These spiritual yoga practitioners practice very strict discipline over the body, engaging in vigorous physical yoga daily, with some of them practicing vegetarianism. Thus, I argue that most of the yoga practitioners we have seen in Hong Kong are engaged in some form of body fetishism.

Let me now discuss the main themes of this thesis under several different key categories.

### **Leisure and Discipline in Hong Kong**

We have seen in chapters 3 and 6 that conspicuous leisure is distinction, but conspicuous discipline may not be. Religious yoga practitioners do not receive much adulation because they are considered too extreme and their asceticism is not appreciated in our society, where a consumer capitalist mentality still reigns.

Spiritual yoga is most available in the most upscale of all studios (which is owned by the largest yoga chain). Spiritual yoga is also available in an Indian studio, which is not the most expensive but demands substantial fees, and often plays up an “authentic Indian yoga” image. In the leisure center for the working class, there is no spiritual element at all. This shows that spiritual yoga is often reserved for the fairly well-off. Spiritual yoga practitioners, by leading a lifestyle that is healthy and partly ascetic, gains them much social credit to explain why they are engaged in yoga, both physical and spiritual. Instead of a decadent lifestyle, which is no longer upheld as the ideal, they choose to lead a healthy

lifestyle, which is the new fashionable trend. “Health in modernity has become viewed as an achievement—something people are supposed to work at to enhance their quality of life” (Cockerham 2007: 49 citing Clarke et al. 2003). Lifestyle has assumed a significant position in class analysis:

The link between lifestyles and social identity therefore signals the growing importance of lifestyles in the analysis of social life. There have been suggestions that lifestyles are a better measure of social position than class as class boundaries become less distinct, but at this stage of history this is not the case as class remains a powerful variable” (Cockerham 2007: 51-52).

Lifestyle provides particular significance for the understanding of social life in our contemporary society (ibid.: 52 citing Giddens 1991: 5). As more people enter the middle class, lifestyle seems to assume more importance in Hong Kong. The findings of this thesis not only correspond to these arguments but illustrate with great detail how lifestyle, with yoga at the core, demonstrates the situation of social class distinction, how the expanding middle class pursues much sophistication in different ways for displaying class status through engaging in yoga, and more specifically, spiritual yoga in Hong Kong.

### **Globalization and Yoga in Hong Kong**

Globalization has been shrinking the world and has enabled yoga to spread to major cities around the world. Yoga has been popularized under the conscious effort of the Indian government; its content has been changed to suit the Western world as a secular exercise for physical health and fitness and to combat stress. Yoga has taken a turn for the physical, leaving much of its spiritual essence behind. Although physical yoga is well-received, some people in “Western” countries have looked for more and have in turn explored Indian yoga philosophy, making it into a major component of the New Age Movement. Hong Kong, having received yoga directly from India and from the West, has had to find its own interpretation of yoga. This has resulted in a yoga scene where there is a hybrid of ethnicity.



In the end, prestige ultimately comes from internationalism, and the ethnicity of the teachers seems to matter less.

### *Going further “East”*

Indian yoga, after being remade in the “West”, has not become more spiritual after going further “East”. Instead, it has mostly become a form of consumption for the sake of beauty, losing much of its spiritual essence. This seems to turn around the stereotypical image of the “spiritual East”. To discuss this on a different level, yoga has taken a new twist towards fetishism of the body, encouraged in a thoroughly commercialized environment offering luxurious enjoyment. Yoga studios have become sites for conspicuous leisure, veiling the discipline and hard work required of yoga. The body is obsessed upon and controlled in the studio environment, and many practitioners of yoga do it for more than aesthetic reasons, because yoga carries double distinction. As originally available for the rich, it carries an image of prestige; but yoga is also trusted to help achieve a slim body, which is the middle-class ideal. Coming back to the “East”, the meaning of yoga has completely shifted.

### **Capital Transference in the Capitalist Society**

Extending on Bourdieu’s terminology of “capital,” most yoga practitioners in Hong Kong want to gain physical capital (an attractive body) through yoga, which is encouraged by the media and made explicit in advertising. Doing so can perhaps increase their prospect of marrying a rich man, or to keep a relationship, since the vast majority of yoga practitioners are women. However, some yoga practitioners do not stop there. They go into yoga philosophy, acquiring cultural, or more specifically, knowledge capital to display their social class or appear different and “more prestigious” than the rest, although they may not

be fully aware of this. As we have seen in Hong Kong, knowledge capital is not directly recognized; it takes physical capital (a slim attractive body) to make it legitimate.

However, the resonance of the intertwined relationship between body and spirituality is not only limited to yoga, but provides important insights into other areas of life in Hong Kong. There is little doubt that indirect forms of capital, other than economic capital, are important for distinction. "Wealth, the ultimate basis of power, can exert power, and exert it durably, only in the form of symbolic capital...the unrecognizable, and hence socially recognizable, form of the other kinds of capital" (Bourdieu 1994: 189). In the recent past in Hong Kong, class was based on money and cultural capital did not matter much. Now, we see a growing emphasis on refinement and knowledge, as a large group of people have entered the middle class. Thus, "knowledge capital," including spirituality and philosophy, becomes a new way to achieve distinction. In the case of yoga, we can see that both body and spirituality have become symbolic capital. This thesis, through probing into the intricate relationship between body and spirituality in yoga, has found that the body serves as primary capital, a bridge conveying knowledge capital to the larger world. Bourdieu argued that the more distant cultural capital is to money, the higher value it has (Bourdieu 1986). This largely describes the situation in Hong Kong except that it is more complex. Knowledge of yoga philosophy alone, without a slender "yogic body," does not bring recognition. It takes the body, with its heavily loaded class symbolism, to link knowledge capital with one's class standing. This shows that Hong Kong as an extremely image-conscious society.

### **Yoga, Class, and Status Evolution**

Yoga reflects the class situation in Hong Kong. Ways for distinction exist in a hierarchy, with body (physical yoga) at the bottom, and spiritual yoga at the top. Spiritual



yoga includes knowledge of yoga philosophy, vegetarianism (which also varies in degree depending on the amount of food forgone) and knowledge of Sanskrit, which lies at the top of the hierarchy and receives the most prestige. These items work on a cumulative scale and generally build upon one another. Most practitioners need to go through physical yoga and have a fit body to gain legitimacy to talk about yoga philosophy. Going up the hierarchy, the prestige increases as the attributes one acquires become more difficult to achieve and fewer people have reached that level.

However, the most visible line dividing yoga participants in Hong Kong lies between physical and spiritual yoga practitioners. It is almost like a division between middle class and upper middle class, characterized mainly by education level, with the former engaged in physical yoga and the latter in spiritual yoga as well. When I say those people engage in spiritual yoga, it does not mean that they do not do physical yoga. Instead, their bodies are actually at least equally as trained as the purely physical yoga practitioners, since they usually spend much time engaging in strenuous physical exercises despite their claims to go beyond the body.

Whether people are aware of it or not, everyone plays the same game of displaying cultural capital, although different strategies may be employed. A slim body for yoga is capital for all social fields and is easily recognized by most people (although they may not be aware of the fact that a given person does yoga). On the other hand, yoga as spirituality is acknowledged in a less explicit sense and by a narrower circle of people, although it carries more prestige. The process of cultural capital acquisition does not have to be conscious and obvious. Even though some people may not be actively seeking cultural capital through participating in yoga, they are gaining it through the process nonetheless.

## Reflections from the Failure of the Hong Kong Yoga Journal

*Yoga Journal* Hong Kong edition, the only local yoga publication for sale in Hong Kong, was a major source of information for practitioners of spiritual yoga. The first edition was published in November 2006. In December 2007, it stopped publishing because of unsatisfactory sales figures. Sales figures had never been good and were only going down. Sixty-two hundred copies were printed for the first issue, with 4,000 copies left over. The publisher had been reducing the number of copies; with the last two issues only 2,000 copies were printed but half nonetheless remained unsold (Yu 2008). Grace Lee, one of the two main shareholders of the venture, attributed the magazine's failure to the lifestyle and instant culture in Hong Kong. "People just do things when they are popular. Because the lifestyle is too fast, people don't have the time to read and understand it, especially if they only want to slim up... The market is just too niche," she said.

### *Upper-middle class with Internationalism*

I argue that this journal's failure is not because of diminishing interest in yoga, but because the market almost did not exist in the first place. The middle, or more often, upper-middle class in Hong Kong, who are the ones keen to know about yoga philosophy and lifestyle and may buy a yoga magazine, are those who have good English ability, as they are usually the ones who have received university education. Thus these people often prefer the original American edition of the journal, which can also be bought in Hong Kong, which is more comprehensive and comes with more information, from what I have found and have been told. They also do not mind paying more for it. This sheds light on the fact that upper-middle-classness in Hong Kong is connected to internationalism, and marked by knowledge of and fluency in English. Indeed, this spiritual yoga community, who adopt an international image of yoga, are some of those whom I have interviewed and spent much



time with during the research of this thesis. This international group of people, regardless of their ethnicity, has much foreign exposure and embraces global trends. Thus not too much can be made of the failure of the local edition of the journal.

### **A New “Yogic” Hong Kong?**

Media as well as some teachers have criticized yoga in Hong Kong for being too commercial and have claimed that much quality has been lost in its commercialization. They say that yoga has become a fashion, a hip activity; and that attention is overly fixated on the body. On the other hand, many teachers see this as a valuable chance to spread yoga. They believe that commercialization of yoga is an entry point, and a good way to introduce yoga to people. With much added glamour and focus on bodily beauty, it can attract a big following, and hopefully, I have been told by a teacher, one in a hundred might become interested in yoga philosophy. Studios which forbid teachers from spiritual discussion may be seen as an impediment to yoga spirituality, but without them, yoga would not have spread at all. This represents a situation resembling that of McWorld vs. Jihad as described by Barber (2001: 216), taking a narrow sense for the meaning of Jihad as a spiritual system, yoga, and that of McWorld as a standardized mass scale commercialization. Using the original definition of Jihad and McWorld, the two are incompatible and individuals are forced to choose between the two (ibid.: 216). However, taking Jihad as yoga and commercialized yoga center chains as McWorld, the two come together perfectly. The spiritual message (Jihad) is infused in selective yoga studios (McWorld); through using commercial forces, McWorld spreads to the masses. This is an example of how commercialization goes into the spiritual world of yoga, and spreads it. In the process, part of its content may be changed, with some quality lost. Yet the power of Jihad (yoga) depends on McWorld (commercial yoga studios) to spread and reach a large audience,

although some of its spiritual element, which may be seen as the essence, is lost in the process. McWorld and Jihad can also be seen as the relationship between body and spirituality, with physical yoga being widely available and standardized in the hands of the commercial yoga studios, and Jihad as the spiritual message in yoga, which is reduced to a minimum in most studios. Thus McWorld and Jihad both help and limit each other. However, as a whole, just as the yoga teachers suggest, the yoga studios may have done more good than bad in popularizing yoga, as there is indeed more spirituality introduced by yoga through that process. The current degree of recognition of yoga has been achieved by commercial institutions, which also contribute to spreading yoga philosophy. But now, said one of the yoga teachers, at least one in a thousand who learn physical yoga in these commercial studios would be interested in yoga philosophy and go on to study it, according to a teacher at Yoga with six years of yoga teaching experience. Through this path, yoga can reach a large audience, and perhaps as some avid yoga practitioners believe, spreading love and peace to the world.

According to two medium-scale studio owners and the owner of *Yoga Journal* Hong Kong, the fervor for yoga in Hong Kong has been cooling since 2007. Large studios have started cutting prices and few new studios have opened. Despite the apparent saturation in the physical yoga market, I foresee that spiritual yoga will gain in popularity. Increasingly, upscale studios offer more classes that have a spiritual touch. Gradually, when spirituality is increasingly adopted by yoga practitioners, more unique, “authentic” and original styles will be introduced into the market. Tibetan yoga is one such example, and it has just been introduced in an upscale studio. Yoga is a vast system of knowledge that is almost impossible to exhaust, and new, innovative styles of yoga keep coming up for customers to choose from. Meanwhile, the goals of yoga according to the yoga scriptures, such as a state of *samadhi*, eternal happiness, and connection with the universe and the Supreme Being,



remain vague and impossible to attain. Even the best known and most advanced teachers internationally do not claim they have reached that state. Thus it will be a long time before spiritual yoga will be fully developed. Therefore I believe that yoga, and especially its spirituality, claiming it has a religious role, will continue to thrive as a form of distinction,

I believe yoga spirituality will continue to grow. As Hong Kong continues to become more middle- and upper-middle class, people need to distinguish themselves in new ways, and spiritual yoga is a good way to do so. I believe that a bipolar situation will arise, where many working-class yoga studios will remain the same over the coming years, offering a variety of physical yoga classes, and the more upscale studios will become more specialized, with more spiritual yoga introduced. The gap within the yoga industry will widen, mimicking the huge wealth gap in Hong Kong in general. This thesis has been about yoga, but it is not about yoga alone. As Hong Kong's middle class increases in number, and society grows in diversity, becoming heterogeneous and knowledge-intensive, the upper-middle class will need to find newer methods to differentiate themselves. What I have said about yoga can be applied to different areas in life. Knowledge of wide-ranging ideas, e.g. African music, Tibetan Buddhism, Sufi poetry, and yoga philosophy are no longer irrelevant, but are becoming valued as useful to show one's knowledge, and by consequence, and perhaps more importantly, one's social-class status. Perhaps anthropology itself will grow in importance in Hong Kong as the knowledge of other societies and cultures becomes increasingly important as a means of asserting upper-middle-class status. But this speculation goes beyond the bounds of this thesis.



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# Appendix

## Demography of yoga practitioners interviewed

The two tables below shows the demographic detail of the 33 informants to show how education has a strong correlation with yoga practitioners' inclination towards spiritual or physical yoga. It shows that the higher the education level and one is educated or has lived in the West, the more likely one is to go into spiritual yoga.

Although there is an approximately equal number of physical and spiritual practitioners as my informants as shown in the table, this does not reflect the ratio in reality. There is overwhelmingly more physical than spiritual practitioners that I have met in the real world, and the exact ratio depends on the particular studio. On the other hand, the ratio of male to female in the table more or less reflects the real scenario as it is around one male practitioner in every ten yoga students.



**Spiritual Practitioners**

Name	Gender	Age	Education background	Occupation	Years of yoga experience	Frequency of yoga practice, and place	Reasons for practice, if any	Remarks
Amanda	F	42	Grew up and received PhD in Australia	Lecturer turned fitness instructor turned yoga teacher	8	Teaches 5 days a week, Feel Yoga	Centers, relaxes, calms the mind, good training as a person.	Accented Cantonese, has white husband.
Caroline	F	32	Raised and attended university in Australia, back to Hong Kong	White collar worker	5	5 classes per week at 2 different studios, Yoga India and Yoga Sanctuary	"It's all about centering and getting myself back into place."	Wears Prada shoes. Considers yoga not as work out at all, but a practice for her mind and soul.
Cindy	F	32	Academy of Performing Art	Dancer turned personal trainer turned yoga teacher.	7	Teaches 6 days a week, practices every day, Feel Yoga	Beyond the body, not about the posture, laughs about the slimming effects of yoga.	Vegetarian. Believes in Hare Krishna but not a strict follower, lives with boyfriend.
Eva	F	45	Holder of master degree, working on her PhD	Lecturer for design courses at an academic institute	6	6 days a week, at 6.30a.m. for 3 hours, at a 5-star hotel	For health reasons, and has deep interest in philosophy.	English lady, came to Hong Kong six years ago. Discusses yoga philosophy elaborately, and practices a strict form of yoga
Karen*	F	35	Australian university graduate	Part-time yoga instructor	5	Every day, for 1 hour, "I don't want to be consumed by yoga," Yoga India		Been to India twice for yoga. Went on yoga retreats. Vegetarian, answer question of another member about vegetarian diet. Speaks perfect English and good knowledge of yoga philosophy.

Kate	F	26	High school and university graduate in Canada.	Assistant editor for a high-ended magazine	6	3 – 4 times a week, Yoga Sanctuary	“As a form of reaching inwards and seeing what I really feel, how to heal the stresses of the day, and rid myself of toxins that overwhelm our systems living in polluted urban clusters.”	Been to India a few times, lived in Europe for 3 years. Glamorous lifestyle and clothing
Kenneth	M	35	High school graduate	Civil servant at the middle management level	4	10-13 classes per week in two different studios, Yoga Sanctuary and Feel Yoga	Wanted to help wife as she suffered from psychiatric problems, did yoga with her, then got involved and developed interest in yoga.	The most esteemed student in the studio because he knows yoga history/tradition, only wears yoga clothes made from a German brand which he ordered online
Mandy	F	60	High school graduate	Administrative staff at insurance company	4	6 days a week, 2-3 classes (one hour each) every day, around, Feel Yoga.	Started as an exercise to slim up, later developed an interest in it.	Reads yoga philosophy every evening, knows everyone at the studio. Life-member there.
Mimi	F	18	Fashion design high-diploma	Student of fashion design	2	Goes to class everyday since joining Yoga India 2 years ago	Invest on herself, healthy body, fun.	3 sisters also same yoga studio, great relationship with teachers and other students
Susanna	F	32	Born in the US, went to school and university in Hong Kong	Spa therapist at a five-star hotel	4	6 times a week, Yoga India		Joined Hare Krishna recently, used to discuss yoga philosophy with friends over wine. Now trying to detach from material consumption.
Sally	F	43	Canadian university graduate	White collar worker	4	4 times a week, Yoga India	Has chronic pain, wants to feel the pain less.	Kiss master on the cheek after chat, feels very touch afterwards



Selina*	F	26	Studied university in the US, worked for 4 years, back to Hong Kong	White collar worker in Shenzhen, because refuse to become investment-banker	4	5 times a week, Yoga Inn	Wanted to exercise at first, and explore the body's potential, then became attracted to its philosophy	See it is as a spiritual quest, which could allow her to find meaning in life. "The physical and spiritual path has coincided."
Shirley	F	35	Born and raised in England after university, back to Hong Kong 10 years ago	Was administrative officer at a university. Quit to study yoga (now a staff at a small trading company)	6	7 times a week, Yoga Sanctuary	Want to get closer to the natural self, and be with the true self.	Wants to be a full-time yoga student, she has been to India 3 times for yoga practice.

Non-spiritual seekers

Name	Gender	Age	Education background	Occupation	Years of yoga experience	Frequency of yoga practice	Reasons for practice, if any	Remarks
Anthony*	M	35	Senior high school	Works in financial industry, quit because of the pressure	3	3-4 times, at Feel Yoga	Wanted to exercise, and to improve health.	Advised to exercise because of psychiatric problem. Does not understand what Cindy meant when she said "yoga is not about the postures."
Cecilia	F	55	Primary education	Teaches yoga amongst dancing, drawing and makes clothes for dance performance	5	2-3 times a week, at an inexpensive gym. Teaches at cheap center	Want to learn something new, to teach something. Thus took classes and then teachers' training course.	Sees yoga as a tough form of stretching, does not know what style of yoga she does, and she doesn't care. Derived her own style of "slimming yoga" to teach
Daisy*	F	57	University in China	Counselor in hospital	10	Everyday in the morning in the past, now only 1 – 2 times per week at home	For health reasons, wants to live longer	Been to India twice to practice yoga, one trip last for 1 year. Vegetarian and Catholic, she has been to India twice to practice.

								Extremely health conscious, and enjoys very little material consumption
Ellen	F	47	High school in China.	Fashion boutique owner	2	Around 3 times a week, Feel Yoga	Wants to lose weight and maintain health.	Comments on her arms being too big, need to do more yoga to improve them
Eugenia	F	40	High school graduate	Clerk in a firm in Central	2	2 times a week and on holidays, Yoga India	To keep fit.	Wearry of meditation, feel that the yoga studio may be a Hindu organization
Jessica	F	32	University in Hong Kong	White collar worker	0.5	2 to 3 times per week, Feel Yoga	Too stressed out at work, now quit job, hopes to use time to relax and ease her shoulder pain.	Made capitalist comment about the body.
Joanna	F	45	Senior school graduate	Owner of a property company	2	Initially 5 times a week, down to 2 times, Yoga India	To slim up.	"I did so much yoga that I became a human jerky. I had to cut down, yoga is really effective!"
Kary	F	43	High school graduate	White collar worker in textile manufacturing	2	5 times a week, Feel Yoga	To heal back tightness and to exercise	Husband at the studio too, despite taking different classes
Lilly*	F	35	High school graduate	White collar worker	3	4 times a week, Yoga Feel	To challenge herself, to replace aerobics in past	No interest in philosophies. Sees yoga as a challenge for herself
Linda	F	28	University in Hong Kong	Flight attendant, got married, then become personal fitness trainer	4	1 hour every afternoon, Yoga India	Helps breathing and stretch out muscles	Jog and work out in gym for hours each day, wears bra top and drinks Evian, brings own mat, and occupies place at front row to look into the mirror
Joey*	M	32	High school in Hong Kong	Previously worked in an Human Resources	5	6 times every week, Yoga Feel, teaches 4 times a	As a workout supplementary to the gym.	



				Company, now teaches yoga full-time		weeks in a private studio		
Martha	F	25	University graduate	Assistant to investment-banking department in bank	1	2 times a week, Yoga Sanctuary	To be good to herself, as yoga feels healthy, and wants to exercise.	Remarks that instructors and students share the same shower facilities
Mary	F	43	High school graduate	White collar worker	2	3-4 times a week, Feel Yoga	To exercise.	
Melissa	F	32	Art academy graduate	Dance teacher	2	2 times a week, Yoga Inn	Wants to teach yoga, thus learn it and joined a teachers' training course.	Not convinced that the fat teacher knows much about yoga philosophy
Master Fung	M	83	Tertiary education	Retired engineer and yoga teacher for 30 years	40+ years, teach for 30+ years	Teaches 5 times a week, at Workers' Union Leisure Center	To strengthen body because of childhood illness	Dismiss the spiritual side of yoga as mystical.
Ms. Mak*	F	53	Primary education	Nanny on school minibus and yoga teacher at Workers' Union	Learned for 20 years, teaching for 10 years	Teaches 3 to 4 times a week, Workers' Union Center	Taking a tai-chi course, wanted to try something else and also taught by Fung.	Yoga taught very much like exercise one would see in parks on the morning. Added massage elements to make it softer and less demanding. A student of Master Fung.
Regina	F	49	High school graduate	Housewife	5	5 times a week, Yoga India, Yoga Sanctuary		First learn from local teacher, then Indian studio, then Western studio.
Tak Nan	F	56	Junior high school graduate	Cashier in an entertainment venue	2	4 times a week, Feel Yoga	To exercise, and to keep fit.	Sometimes go shower at the studio even does not take class
Vincent	M	62	University graduate, with 2 master degrees	Retired engineer	1	2 times per week, Bikram Yoga	To ease back pain.	Wants to lose weight, but not effective
Winnie	F	36	University	White collar worker	3	Every day before work,		Although a physical practitioner, she has a

			graduate			Yoga India	view that yoga should be more than a gym workout. Does not like the pink studio, feels that a yoga studio should not be like that.
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\* Informants whom I have not quoted directly in the thesis but their data contributed to the analysis of this thesis.





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